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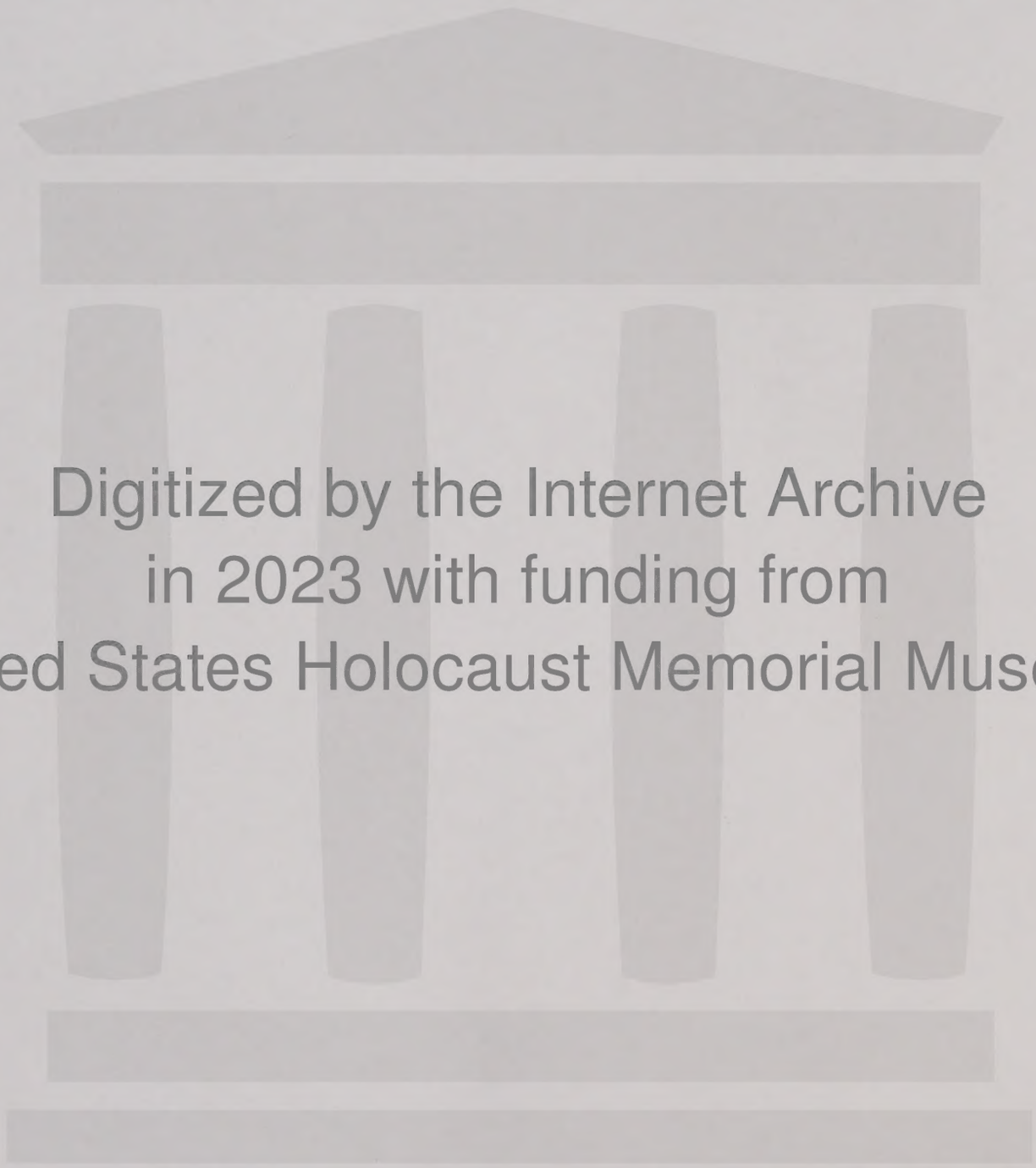
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ALWAYS A STRANGER

by

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8th June, 1946

TO-DAY, AS WE CELEBRATE VICTORY, I send this personal message to you and all other boys and girls at school. For you have shared in the hardships and dangers of a total war and you have shared no less in the triumph of the Allied Nations.

I know you will always feel proud to belong to a country which was capable of such supreme effort; proud, too, of parents and elder brothers and sisters who by their courage, endurance and enterprise brought victory. May these qualities be yours as you grow up and join in the common effort to establish among the nations of the world unity and peace.

George R.I.

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PART 1

EVACUATION

Chapter 1

Evacuation

I had been right to feel prickly when Cousin Zalman, who had escaped the Nazis, collapsed in my grandfather's arms. He wore the khaki uniform of the Polish Free Army and wept, "The Nazis killed my wife and little girl." My Zada held him close.

I had been right to fear the fascists who painted black swastikas and JP--Jews should Perish--on brick walls in East London. I had been right to fear those same Blackshirts who had goose stepped to Cable Street to smash Jewish shops and heads in 1936. I had been right to feel worried when Ilona, the first refugee in our school, hadn't heard from her parents in Berlin for months. I had been right, while staying with Aunt Ellen at Portsmouth this hot summer of 1939, to fear the gigantic gray battleship prickling with guns like a hedgehog, and right to run helter-skelter from the voice shouting near her beach house, "Get off the target area."

They had all been signs.

Miss Crawford, the headmistress of Buxton Street Elementary School, called us together class by class in the dark assembly hall. She stood on a sturdy wooden chair. We nine-year-olds stood far below, white faces upturned. Her horsey face was dark, her eyes puffy. Big veins stuck out on her neck.

"England has declared war on Germany," she said quietly.

"You will all be evacuated immediately to foster homes in the country for a short time."

"No, it isn't true," I burst out.

"Go home and get a pillowcase. Put in it one change of underwear, a nightie or pajamas, one bar of soap, and sandwiches for the train ride. Be back here in half-an-hour."

Our school was ten minutes of slum-land from my house. I raced home and told Mummy what we had to do. I ran round in circles while she calmly packed the white pillowcase. My clothes made a small lump in the bottom of it.

"Why am I being sent away?" I cried, one foot out of the door, hand stretched out for the lumpy pillowcase and bumpy gas-mask box.

"London might be bombed any minute," Mummy said. "Children from all over London are being evacuated but East End kids are going first. We're near the docks where the Germans will likely bomb. And they want us East Enders out first because the government thinks poor families will loot the rich. Isn't that a joke?"

But she didn't laugh.

"Do you have your gas mask and identity bracelet?"

"Yes." I jiggled the bracelet.

Mummy had a slim silver bracelet made for me with my identification number, name, and address engraved on it. We children all had identity numbers now, in case we got lost or

captured by Nazis. The BBC said the Germans had invaded Poland.

"You'll be safe in the country," Mummy said cheerfully, as if I were going to the seaside.

The war was a new reason for her to send me away again. With a big safety pin, Mummy pinned a luggage tag with my name, address, and identity number to my coat. I didn't like being labeled like a parcel. It reminded me of the orphanage.

"Goodbye," she said, as I left. She didn't even kiss me.

I ran back to school with the hundreds of other kids, all of us carrying our pillowcases and gas masks. The pillowcases were light. The gas mask, that ugly black rubber thing, sat like a great spider in a square cardboard box, which we hung over our shoulders and across our chests on a string. My friend Nora and I had tried them on. They stank of rubber. When we put them on in front of Mummy's wardrobe mirror, we looked like goggle-eyed monsters from outer space.

Women I didn't know suddenly appeared on the streets.

"Run," they said, so we ran. We didn't know why, except that maybe a bomb was going to drop on us. I imagined a long black bat that fell out of the sky and hit you like a hard ball.

As we ran to school, gas masks jouncing on our backs, men with big black cameras ran beside us. "Smile and wave," they shouted, "You're going to be in the newspapers."

None of us children felt like smiling. We were going away,

who knew where or for how long? I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye to Daddy who was out, to Booba or Zada, my grandparents, nor to Uncle Sam or Aunty Regina and her new husband, Uncle Adrian. I'd just been bridesmaid at their wedding. Except for Mummy, my family wouldn't even know I'd gone. Even Mummy didn't know where I was going.

Once we got to school, panting and out of breath, Miss Crawford and the teachers shouted, "Everyone form a crocodile." I chose Nora as my partner. We held hands and got into a long line with all the other children. Girls walked with girls and boys with boys.

"Everyone in twos? Good. We'll walk to Liverpool Street Station," Miss Crawford said.

I was happy that at least I'd see my favorite station before leaving London again. I looked back over my shoulder. The line of children in twos, curved a little, looking just like the tail of a crocodile. I'd seen pictures of crocodiles in Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, and read about how the crocodile got his smile. Ours was a grumpy crocodile.

Kids from other schools tramped the streets in crocodiles coming from all other directions, aimed toward Liverpool Street Station. We all carried the same luggage except for a tiny girl of about four who carried a pink potty. Her mother walked beside her.

"Get back. No parents allowed in the children's lines," said

a woman with a band on her arm. The mother fell back, crying, "Maisie."

"Mummy, Mummy, don't leave me," Maisie cried, clutching her potty. It had pink butterflies on it. I thought it very pretty.

"Keep walking, don't dillydally," the band-woman said.

"Where we going?" a small boy asked his brother.

"I dunno, seaside, I fink. I took me bucket an' spade."

"Nah, I 'eard someone say we're goin' to Sweden."

"That was Swindon, not Sweden, you idjit."

I felt tears falling. I didn't want to leave home again, nor my grandparents, aunts and uncles. I loved London. I'd only been home two years from the orphanage. Now because of the war Mummy was sending me away again. Another excuse to get rid of me.

We passed a long line of people standing outside the veterinarian's holding their pets. A woman hugged a little Scottish terrier, crying, "My poor little Toby, they won't let us keep you in the country. Please forgive me."

Her husband patted her shoulder.

"There, there, Lil, don't take on so. War'll soon be over, we'll get another dog."

The dog licked Lil's face and whined as if she understood. I knew the dog was going to be put to sleep. Mummy had once given me half a crown and said, "Take the cat to the vet and give him the money."

Along the way, posters in huge black letters read, "The

Blackout is now in force. No chink of light must be seen from any window after 7:47 p.m. Volunteer for the Air Raid Patrol, the ARP." The ARP wardens, looking important in their tin hats like upside down soup bowls, went round banging on windows.

"*Alte kakas*," old shits, too old to join the forces, that's who the ARP is," Booba, my grandmother, said. Booba was smart, but cold with a tongue like a lash. Uncle Max, Mummy's brother, now eighteen, had already been drafted. Uncle Sam was classified 4F because of his hump, so he stayed and helped Booba in her grocery shop. Dad was also 4F because he was deaf. Nearly all the men in London disappeared overnight. Uncle Adrian, Aunt Regina's new husband, was exempt because he was doing "essential" chemical work for the government.

Although Daddy and Mummy were exempt, a word I'd just learned, the government could send them wherever they were needed. Daddy was going to Wales for a few months to be a barber in a hospital. Their barber had been called up. Mummy would have to close the men's section of our shop while he was away. Daddy had trained Uncle Max and Uncle Sam to be barbers. But with Uncle Max in the army, Booba needed Uncle Sam to help in *her* shop.

"They're bound to bomb London, us being the biggest city in the world," I heard one mother saying to another. "I 'opes we don't get it like Spain and China got it. 'orrible."

I was afraid of these bombs they kept talking about. I

looked up in the sky, very worried. Mummy had told me that in the First World War, they had to get under their desks in school because of German bombs.

Overhead, enormous gray blimps called "Flossie" and "Blossom" floated on ropes in the grey sky. Looking like giant balloons, they were supposed to entangle German planes.

"Run," said the teachers, and we all began to run, shoes clattering along the stone-cobbled streets.

As we ran through the busy streets of Bishopsgate, we passed children from other schools. The boys wore white open-necked shirts, short wool trousers, wool jackets, high socks and school caps. We girls wore white socks, strap or tie shoes and coats with half belts at the back. Some girls wore ribbons tied round their heads with a bow on top, or around one lock of hair. I was growing out of my old clothes. My dress stuck out below my coat.

There were other stations like Paddington and Victoria, but Liverpool Street Station was "our station," mine and my best friend, Joycey's. We often walked the mile there on a Saturday just to look inside, hands on each other's bums.

The newspaper hawkers crowded outside Liverpool Street Station were shouting, "England evacuates its children, thahsands leaving London daily. Getcha *Daily News*."

The news was scrawled in black four inch letters on stands in front of the station: "August 30, 1939, Children of Britain are Evacuated. London Prepares for German Bombing."

We all clattered down the stone stairs into the bowels of the station, our shoes making a noise like thunder and lightning.

Inside the station below were smoky, dusty cafes with grimy windows. I wished I could leave the crowds of children and buy a cup of strong tea, a cheese or sandwich or a bar of Cadbury's chocolate. I was drowning in a sea of pushing, shoving children.

Through the open door of a cafe, I saw men eating ham sandwiches, pigs in blankets and pork pies. Women were buying magazines and newspapers from Smith's Stationers. I noticed a mysterious sign that said, "Night Boat Train to Paris," but no one was going in or coming out of that door. When I grew older, I'd board that Night Boat Train to Paris.

Inside the sooty station, the mothers and any fathers who came to say goodbye stood behind waist-high black iron railings. I saw Maisie's mother standing there, crying.

"Maisie, Maisie, here I am," she called to the little girl.

The child cried and snivelled when she saw her mother, but the armbanded women shouted, "Stay in your line."

I threw back my head and gazed up giddily at the smoky-glass ceiling, as high as St. Paul's Cathedral. Birds flew among the iron girders, chattering. I liked London birds, cheeky like Londoners. I had loved to watch the enormous black trains shunting back and forth, their snorts echoing against the glass roof, their white smoke puffing as they chugged in and out of the giant station. I even loved the walls of the station, black with

soot.

The stationmaster's clear, high whistle pierced my ears. I watched him gravely wave his red flag up and down, signalling the train driver it was time to leave. On a far track last-minute passengers ran past the ticket collector, pushed their tickets into his hand, rushed up to moving trains, and jumped like acrobats onto the running board, their coattails flying. They slammed the doors with a clack, let down a window by its leather thong, and leaned out grinning and waving goodbye to friends or family. Arriving passengers spilled out of the train doors like unwinding balls of wool. I loved it all.

Usually, women wearing smart hats and white gloves and men in trilbies or bowlers sat in the train. If it was raining, they would carry a brolly and wear Mackintoshes and Wellington boots. Most women brought a box of chocolates and a pile of magazines. The men in First Class read *The Times*. Sometimes a relative or friend brought flowers when they came to say goodbye, as my mother did when I went away, waving her white hanky until I disappeared from her view. She kept lacy hankies for goodbyes.

Thousands of children crowded the platforms. I felt dizzy with the jostling around me, the children jabbering. "Cor blimey, look at all them sandbags," Nora Eglash said.

"Look at the tape acrost all the windows in the roof," my other friend Pearl Snopkovsky said, staring upward. "My Mum said that's to stop glass from flying when the bombs drop."

I shivered. We'd never seen anything but rain or snow dropping from the sky.

Blackout drapes hung over the station entrances. Instead of the usual tan shade, the trains now all had black ones over the windows. Mummy said they were pulled down at dusk, so that the carriage lights couldn't be seen from outside. The Germans would bomb the trains if they saw light coming from them. We had learned to pull black curtains over the inside of our doors and windows as night fell, in case the Jerries came to bomb us.

I lined up with the other kids, our white faces staring anxiously about, waiting to leave home. For me it was the latest of many departures. This one was different though. My stomach hurt, my eyes teared. My back ached from the gas mask and the stuffed pillowcase. I felt weighed down with misery. I was being carried off in a big tide with thousands of other pushing children, all of us tagged and numbered, gasmask boxes hanging across our chests and backs. We looked like soldiers, little soldiers, off to war.

In the crush our lines were getting out of order.

"Form double lines," a woman shouted above the din. "Form a crocodile."

I didn't know any of these women. Maybe they were volunteers. Our school lines stretched across the entire station, probably the longest crocodile in history. Other school groups stretched across the station in different directions. I

didn't know there were so many elementary schools in London.

"Each school is going to be evacuated to a different country town or village. We can't tell you where you're going, it's all secret," Miss Crawford said. "We don't want the Germans to know *anything*."

A little boy of about four or five, tearful and sniveling, wiped his nose on his sleeve. He looked back over his shoulder to see if his mother or father was still there behind the iron rail. Some mothers stood behind the rail holding children under four, too young to be evacuated. I'd heard some mothers would be evacuated with their children, while the fathers stayed in London or were called up.

Still in their aprons, many mothers stood behind the black barriers waving. Some cried like their children, others laughed gaily as if this was an outing. Some mothers couldn't bear to come to the station to say goodbye. One woman was crying into her husband's shoulder, his arm around her waist. Another woman dashed outside the iron railings, and snatched her little girl of about five out of the line.

"I can't let you go," she sobbed, carrying the child back.

"You can't do that," one of the strange women said, but the mother pushed her away.

"She's *my* child, I'm taking her home," she cried.

"Mummy, Mummy take me home," the child cried, winding her little arms around her mother's neck as the mother hugged her

close and ran out of the station. I wished Mummy would come and rescue me. Bombs or no bombs, I didn't want to leave London or home.

Mummy had finally come to the station and stood behind the black rail laughing and chatting with another woman. They were already exchanging addresses. We had no telephone but we had two post deliveries a day. "Drop in for a cup of tea," Mummy would say. "We love to have visitors."

I remembered two refugee boys from Frankfurt, whom Daddy and I had seen at the station the month before. I imagined they had parted from their parents as sorrowfully as some of these children. It was worse for them, since they were going to a foreign country, England, not knowing the language or if they'd see their parents again. I might never see my parents again either. A bomb might drop on them.

Mummy waved to me cheerfully, as usual fluttering her white lacy goodbye handkerchief that always smelled of violets. I was tired and disappointed. I'd only just got used to being home and the bloody war had to break out. Leaving London might be a first for other children, but for me this was just one more trip to the hateful silent countryside, one more trip to non-Jewish *goyishe* strangers who didn't want me.

No more double-decker red buses to race upstairs, no exciting train rides to Mummy's friends, no steaming fish and chip shops, hairdressing shop smelling of hair tonic and ammonia

and filled with sweaty men and women Friday nights and Saturdays. No more of Booba's grocery shop, light and airy, smelling of pickles. No Zada to hug and kiss me, no open air markets, no brawny men shouting, "ten a penny, come on guv, ten a penny." No street artists drawing pictures on the pavement in colored chalk, or Salvation Army parades, "*poom, poom, poom.*" No more museums, no more library, no more playing or reading in Shoreditch Church cemetery, no more playgrounds. No West End with posh shops and restaurants, no music, no lights. No Mummy playing the piano, no Daddy taking me to the museum or to Houndsditch, no teasing uncles or glamorous aunty Regina. Tears began to gather in my eyes. I rubbed them away angrily. English girls didn't cry.

The long trains, usually full to bursting, stood empty and silent. Their open windows stared at us, black shades now hung at every window. It was like, I imagined, a funeral train--square eyes lined in black. I expected black tears to fall out of the windows.

"Everybody on the train," shouted the women and we all surged inside. Soon it was packed with hundreds of us.

"Cor, I ain't never bin on a fuckin' train, 'ave you, Nobby?" one of the scruffy boys in my carriage grunted, scratching his head with one hand, his crotch with the other.

Titch Dawson (Titch, the nickname for someone small or for someone very big) was scrawled on his name tag.

"Yerss, I wos once on a train ter Brighton," Nobby said.

"I want my Mummy," sobbed a little girl of about seven, sucking her thumb and hiccupping.

I wondered what had happened to Maisie.

"You nippers shut up or scram. We don't want that racket in 'ere, do we Titch?" Nobby shouted, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Another boy of about ten, white-faced, stared silently at his own reflection in the window. I walked out of the carriage down the corridor. In the next carriage, five nine-year-old boys were fighting happily with one another while a sixth was peeing in a rainbow arc out of the open window. Further down a group was singing, "Ten green bottles, 'anging on the wall." Others were eating the sandwiches their mothers had packed.

None of us really understood war. We thought it was a game we played on the steps of Shoreditch Church after school. One of us would run to the top step, wave and shout, "I'm the King of the Castle and you're the dirty rascal!" Then we'd fight with mock swords. *That* was war.

Then I saw Maisie, sitting in the middle of a carriage on her potty, crying her eyes out. No one took any notice of her. I was too upset myself to go to her. I couldn't bear to speak to anyone. If I did I'd burst into tears myself.

I didn't see an adult during the whole ride. Had we been deserted so soon? The train wheels clackety-clacked past the soot-blackened houses of the East End, their smoke-dirtied wash hanging across grimy back yards. After a while the grimy houses

and washing changed to clean houses, like the ones I'd lived in at Mrs. One-Tit Major's house the summer before.

The train wheels clacked out the rhythm, "far from home, far from London. Staying with strangers, staying with strangers." Why did I have to go away again? I'd been in exciting London and close to all my relatives for two glorious years since I was seven. Now I was nine. A big girl. I didn't need much care, I thought, as long as I could live in London. I had Joycey, my *goyishe* friend to roam with all over East London. I saw my gloomy face reflected in the train window. My eyes were scrunched up, bags under them. I'd had bad dreams all night. My mouth turned down, my shoulders drooped. The train sped on, taking us further and further away from my family and London. "Clackety-clack, leaving London, clackety-clack, far from home, clackety-clack, going to strangers. . ."

The clean houses disappeared and the train chuffed by green fields with cows and horses lazily chewing the grass. I thought the orphanage in Chingford where I'd been from ages five to seven had been in the country, but now I saw it wasn't really the country. I'd never seen animals there.

From the train windows I saw cows, sheep, endless green fields and green trees, and here and there a few houses standing by themselves in the middle of fields. I supposed they were the farm houses.

"Peter helps Father milk the cows. Pam helps Mother bake

bread in the kitchen," we'd read in our schoolbooks. The closest I'd come to a cow was the one I'd seen in Peterson's Milk Company in an underground stable at the bottom of Black Lion Yard in the heart of East London. That was a London cow.

"Wot's them animals?" Nobby asked, pointing to white, woolly creatures and taller brown and white beasts wandering in fields near the train. "Are they goin' ter eat us?"

"Them's sheep and cows. We eats *them*," Titch said.

"I ain't nivver bin on a train nor seen a field nor sheep nor cows," Nobby said. "Looks like they got six sides."

"Well you seed 'em now so shut yer gob," Titch said, scratching his head. I bet he had lice like lots of kids in the East End. I shifted further into my corner. I began to itch, too.

The train clattered along endlessly. There were no stops. No one got on and no one got off. We flew past stations with their names covered over. After about two hours, the train slowed. We all jumped up and crowded at the window to look outside. The train suddenly squealed to a stop and we all jerked backward. Nobby and Titch fell down.

"Get your fucking bum off my face," Nobby growled at Titch.

"Snot nose," Titch said.

2.

Billeting

The name of this station was covered over, too. How far away from home was I this time? How would I ever get back? Every time mother sent me away, I thought of Hansel and Gretel's mother leading them into the woods to lose them. This time I wasn't the only one being sent away. All the children were leaving London as if following the Pied Piper. Only there was no gaily dressed man prancing ahead, playing a flute, and we had arrived in the middle of nowhere.

"Everyone out and line up single file," a woman shouted from the platform. "Show us your identity number as you get off."

Shouting and crying children, and many more who were silent like me, jumped down onto the wooden platforms and slammed the train doors shut.

Little Maisie, holding her potty, climbed down the steep train stairs backwards, the way babies do. I ran to help her. She clung to my hand. Her hand was wet, and her nose was running.

"Get back into your own line," a woman snapped at me.

I stuck my tongue out at her fat bum.

The empty train chugged away slowly, blowing a mournful farewell hoot. Perhaps it was going back to London to pick up another hundred children.

"I want to go back," I cried, running after the train.

"Come back here," the woman shrilled, catching me by the collar and dragging me back. "Get back in line." She shoved me, staggering like the drunks on Saturday night, back into line. I scowled at her. Two more women came from outside the station. They wore heavy tweed skirts, hand-knitted cardigans, ugly tweedy hats and flat shoes. They must have been country women.

On the other side of the tracks, I could see two long tables, a glum woman sitting behind each. Small piles sat on the tables in front of the women.

"Go quickly down the steps, cross over the tracks, and run up the stairs on the other side to the opposite platform. When you get to those two women on the other side, hold your pillowcase open as you run by. Don't stop," the tweed woman said. They herded us quickly into a single file.

"Hurry up, hurry up," the women cried out. What was the hurry? We're going to be here for years, I thought.

"Run," the women urged, almost crying. I supposed they were also worried about the war. They stared with horror in their eyes at the glittering empty train tracks, as if expecting an awful monster to come along them.

I ran behind the other children down wooden steps, just another little girl among hundreds. I felt angry at being hurried and pushed around. I wanted to tear the label off my coat, to be called by my own name, to be home in London where everything and everyone was familiar. I wanted to be away from this cold place

not knowing where I was, where I was going, nor for how long, nor how to get back--lost, like Gretel in the forest.

I ran past the first miserable-looking woman, holding open my white pillow case. She threw a bar of chocolate into it. The second woman, also grim-faced, threw in a bar of soap. They probably thought all London kids were dirty--or perhaps soap would soon be rationed. Daddy had told me soap had fat in it needed for guns. "It's guns or butter," he'd said.

The women must have practiced that throw because they did it so smoothly. No one spoke to us except to give us orders. No one smiled, "Hello," or, "Everything will be all right."

We were soon turned over to a new set of women who stared at us severely.

"These are your billeting officers," the train women said.

Each billeting officer pulled about twenty children round her. Mine didn't look at our name tags or ask our names. She called us all "you." She wore a green tweed suit, a brown tweed hat, and flat shoes. Her hair was gathered in a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore no powder or lipstick, the way Mummy and Aunt Regina did. Her white mouth was a straight line.

"Your billeting officer will place each of you in a foster home," a train woman said, in a cold voice. "Go."

My billeting officer led twenty of us up a deserted street and banged the knocker of the first door. A woman in an apron answered. A snotty-nosed child of two clutched at her skirts.

"Will you take an evacuee?" the billeting officer said.

"Don't want none," the woman snarled. The door slammed shut.

"Have you got a little girl with blonde hair? One like Shirley Temple?" another woman said when she opened the door.

"No, but I have a little girl with dark hair, will she do?"

"I s'pose," she answered, and the tweedy billeting officer pushed the little girl into the house. The door closed.

"We don't want no boys," said the woman in the next house.

"We have a brother and sister, will you take two?" our billeting officer asked at the next house.

"Only one, the girl."

Turning to the boy, the officer said, "I'm afraid you'll have to be separated, I'll try to get you in next door." I could see she was tired. There were now ten of us left.

"I want my bruvver," the girl began to cry. The door closed.

The sky was growing dark and the air felt chilly. Soon there'd be no lights because of the blackout. I supposed that was why they'd been in such a hurry to get us out of the station. People caught in the blackout might get run down by a passing car or a bicycle. With black paper over their lights, they could hardly see where they were going. The billeting officer wore gloves with white palms so drivers could see her and not knock her down. The week before Mummy had been knocked down in the dark by a bicycle. She said that trains traveling at night were so heavily blacked-out, you couldn't see them in the station nor

find their doors.

I was the last child. I felt cold, hungry, and miserable. No one chose me. Perhaps my slanted eyes and pierced ears gave me away as Jewish. I wondered what my new foster mother would be like if anyone ever took me in. Suppose she really was a witch pretending to be kind like the one in Hansel and Gretel? Suppose she would fatten me up so as to eat me? The strange woman taking us around wouldn't leave me in the street, like Gretel, would she? It was dark, now. I shivered as the wind gusted round my ankles.

If they didn't find me a place soon, and in a nice house with a kind foster mother, I'd run away. I'd go back to the station and sneak onto a train back to London.

We came to a hilly street called King's Row. Small houses, each one exactly like the other, stood joined to each other, making a wave up the long hill. The tweedy billeting officer banged on a door. I could hear shuffling from the other side. A bent little old lady, her face wrinkled, opened the door. She had a kind smile. I could see she wore false teeth like many people in the East End.

"Can you *please* take this evacuee, at least for tonight?" The billeting officer pushed me inside and, without waiting for an answer, ran away down the hill, hair flying in the wind.

Her bun had come undone.

3

Foster Parents

"Come along, dear," said the little old lady in a trembly voice. "My name is Mrs. Ancliffe and this is Mr. Ancliffe."

A small man of perhaps sixty, far older than my Zada stood next to his tiny wife. He wore a woolly sleeveless Faire-Isle sweater. Zada always wore a white shirt, a tie, and a suit. The man's blue eyes blinked behind large glasses.

"Come and have some tea, dear. You can sit in Tim's seat."

I wondered who Tim was.

The old lady drew me to a low table and a couch and gave me a cup of tea. The lid of the brown tea pot wobbled as she poured. Cold and hungry, I was grateful for the tea. If the old woman had been Jewish, she'd have offered me food as soon as I stepped in.

I knew she wasn't a witch, though. She wasn't feeding me enough.

"You see that picture up there?"

She pointed to a sepia picture of a young soldier standing stiffly to attention. He wore a khaki uniform and his hair was cut so short he looked almost hairless. His face was serious.

"We had a little boy once, Timothy, but he was killed in the Great War. Now they call it the First World War. That's him. He was our only child. We gave him to the war to end all wars, and now we may be at war again." Mrs. Ancliffe's eyes filled with

tears. The cup in her hand shook.

The young man stared at me without smiling. Perhaps he didn't like me sitting in his seat. He must have been dead a long time, his parents were so old. I'd heard about the Great War from Mummy. She also thought there would never be a second war. Hadn't I heard Neville Chamberlain saying only the week before on the wireless that Hitler wanted peace? Then why were we being evacuated, and why were bombs going to fall on London?

I remembered the Great War veteran with one leg who always stood in Bethnal Green Road trying to sell pencils. He had ribbons all over his chest. I never saw him sell a pencil. And now Mrs. Ancliffe was telling me about her son who'd fought and fallen in the First World War. Seeing the picture of a young man who had really died in that war, *war* grew a tiny bit more real--as something that really had happened. It wasn't just a game we played on the steps of Shoreditch Church after school, slashing at each other with stick swords. War was when bombs dropped and the pencil man had his leg shot off and Mummy crouched under the desk, and when Mr. and Mrs. Ancliffe's son had been killed. I imagined him shot through the heart and falling down crying out, "Mama," and lying dead. Somehow he had turned into a flat brown picture on the wall staring at me as if I had something to do with it.

"Time for bed, dear," Mrs. Ancliffe said.

Mrs. Ancliffe lit a candle and put it in a candleholder.

She led me to a door with an iron latch on it. When she pulled the door open I saw to my surprise a staircase. She took me up the tiny, narrow staircase carrying the candleholder shakily. They didn't even have gas, let alone electric light. Our shadows darted along the staircase.

"This was Timothy's room," she said. We fished out my nightie from the bottom of the pillow case. I gave her the bar of soap. I'd already eaten the cheese sandwiches and the chocolate. The flickering candle cast jumping, scary shadows over all the walls. Mrs. Ancliffe tucked me snugly into a soft bed. At least she was kind. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad being evacuated in the home of such a kind old lady.

"Goodnight, child," she said, and she went downstairs with the candle. I was left in the pitch black silence of a strange home. I hoped Timothy didn't mind me being in his bed. I felt his ghost shift beside me. "Help," I screamed, jumping out of bed, "there's a ghost."

But there was dead silence and darkness. I felt alone. I stayed awake until dawn.

The next day, the Ancliffes turned on their ancient wireless. At eleven a.m. Prime Minister Chamberlain told us that England was at war with Germany. Mrs. Ancliffe burst into tears. Mr. Ancliffe stared out of his big glasses. His misty eyes stared at the sepia face of his dead son, the one whose ghost I'd

slept with the previous night.

"There, there, mother," he said, patting his wife's shoulder.

I was getting used to the Ancliffes except I was always hungry. They ate so little. These *goyishe* people ate like birds. Booba used to say of some people, "*Es ve a fagel un kakt ve a faird*," Eats like a bird and shits like a horse.

The second evening I was there we had two slices of bread and salty butter and tea for dinner, then we sat on the couch.

"You see that little cupboard?" The Ancliffes pointed to a low-latched door about three feet high. "Once when our Timothy was a little boy and was naughty we shut him in that cupboard. Later we saw something wet trickling out. D'you know what it was?"

"No," I said. I thought he'd probably wet his trousers but it wasn't polite to say so.

"That little scamp had opened the homemade wine we kept in there, and he rolled out dead drunk." The old couple laughed, then cried.

At bedtime I was again afraid of Timothy's ghost and couldn't sleep until dawn.

After I spent two days with the Ancliffes, the billeting officer came.

"You're going to the Pettits," she said. She didn't say why.

Perhaps I was only meant to spend a few days with the Ancliffes. Perhaps they found it too much at their age to care for a little girl. Perhaps I brought back painful memories of their dead son. Perhaps they wanted to be left alone with memories of their Timothy, the rascal.

"Goodbye dear, be good," Mrs. Ancliffe said.

3

The Orphanage

This wasn't the first time I'd been left at a door. By the age of six I'd been sent away from home twice.

One drizzly night in December of 1934, as fog horns from the docks sounded softly, Mummy took my hand and led me to Liverpool Street Station. How excited I was when we came to Bishopsgate with all its shops and cafes lit up and crowded with jolly people.

We passed a poster of sad children in poor gray clothes. Large letters above them said, "Help Dr. Barnardo's orphanages."

I'd read about orphans like Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel in my fairy tale books. I was lucky to have a father and mother, my grandmother, Booba, and grandfather, Zada, aunts and uncles. I would never find myself in a Barnado orphanage.

We ran down the stone steps into the station. Black trains huffed in and out, white steam pouring from them.

"Hurry up, get in the carriage," Mummy said, pushing her finger in my back. I loved riding in trains, but where were we going? I didn't ask.

Rain poured down furiously, lashing against our carriage. The wind moaned like a crying woman as the train rattled off, gathering speed. Our dim, yellow-lit carriage was empty except for another woman. The woman wore a mackintosh, carried an umbrella with a sapphire-blue glass handle, and her leather glove

lay curled up like a claw on the velvet seat. In spite of the dreary evening, Mummy and the woman chatted away happily like old friends. The woman offered me a chocolate. I refused.

We drew into a station where a large sign in black on white said, *Chingford.* Where was Chingford? The two women wrote down each other's address.

"Pop in any time," Mummy said, waving to the woman as we left the train. The woman waved back, smiling through the rain.

The rain turned to snow which batted against our faces and laced Mummy's mascaraed eyelashes with white as we trudged up a hill. There were no cheerfully lit shops, no jolly pubs about. We passed only silent streets and bare black trees. We stopped at a huge house called `Forest Hall.'

A thin young maid in a white cap and apron answered the bell.

"This way," she said. "Warden is expecting you."

She led us to another oak door, ducked her head and knocked.

"Come," said a man's voice.

Mummy pushed me ahead with her finger into a great bright room with a red Persian carpet and a warm coal fire. A man in a brown tweed suit sat behind a desk. He had a broad chest, smooth cheeks, pink as a pig's, and thin sandy hair. I always noticed a person's hair because Mummy and Daddy were hairdressers.

"This is my daughter," Mummy said.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Moss. Short goodbyes are the best," he said.

Mother kissed my mouth. She smelled of Yardley's cologne and the violet, heart-shaped sweets she sucked against bad breath.

"Be a good girl," she said, and left. I burst into tears. A tall fat nurse in a white apron and cap bustled into the room.

"Come along," she said, pulling my hand. "I'm Nurse Harris. How old are you, five? Don't cry. You're not a baby any more."

She led me into a huge room lit only by candles. As my eyes became used to the dark, I saw six other small children, aged three or four, sitting at a little table. They stared at me but didn't speak. At another table in the center of the room, sat some thirty white-faced boys and girls ages six to fourteen, on benches. All stared at me. A tall tree with tiny stiff green leaves stretching into arms grew out of the middle of the floor next to our small children's table. How could a tree grow inside a room? Why did it have torn silver paper wound round it, and a celluloid fairy dolly on top?

Later, the nurse led me with the other tiny children to a nursery with iron-framed beds. No one spoke. Worn out, I slept.

The next day snow fell without stopping. Nurse Harris took us to the long room with the wooden trestle table in the center. A tall, skinny woman, white nurse's apron crackling, rushed in carrying a steaming white enamel bowl.

"Be quiet you children, I have a splitting headache."

"That's Sister," the skinny girl next to me whispered.

Each child brought Sister a tin bowl into which she dumped

one ladle of porridge. "Yor turn," said the girl next to me.

The porridge was lumpy, with no milk or sugar. Where were the crisp white rolls and butter we bought fresh every morning, and the hot tea that we had at home? I'd never had porridge, but I'd read about it in Goldilocks and the Three Bears. As we ate, Sister hit us on the back with a stick and said, "Sit straight."

"Me name's Violet," the girl next to me whispered. "What's yourn?"

I told her.

Violet was a blond-haired cockney urchin, a head taller than me, pale and thin, with large, beautiful and sad violet eyes. Her nails were bitten down to the cuticle.

"How long have you been here?" I asked her.

"Since I was four."

"How old are you now?"

"Eight."

"When's your mother coming for you?"

"Don't 'ave a mother. She died when I wos four."

"What about your father?"

"'Ain't got no farver. 'E's dead, too."

I began trembling. Violet had no mother or father. She was an orphan. This must be an orphanage like Dr. Barnado's, but what was I doing there? *I* had a mother and a father. My mother wouldn't leave me here until I was eight, would she? She'd come back tomorrow or next week to get me, or surely after the

Christmas rush in the shop. Or would she?

Mummy had told me more than once *she'd* never wanted to have a baby and I'd torn her womb, whatever that was.

After Christmas we began school. We walked every day in a crocodile, two by two, holding hands. One day the class gathered in a large, dark hall to choose parts for a play.

"Now I don't want anyone to put their hand up and ask to go to the bathroom," Miss Lawson said.

A minute later, to my horror, I saw a puddle directly in front of my feet on the floor. My bloomers were warm and wet. Nurse Harris was summoned to the school to walk me back to the orphanage.

"Hurry up, I never did, a big girl of six wetting her bloomers. You're a disgrace," she raged at me.

I hung my head, ashamed. *I* couldn't understand it either.

As we came to a main road, a crowd of men and women stood in a circle staring at something on the ground. Through a parting in the circle, I saw a horse and cart. The horse's head hung down as if *he* were as ashamed as I. A plump woman lay flat on her back on the ground behind the cart, her arms and legs spread out. She wore a short-sleeved dress her arms and legs were bare. Suddenly her pale skin parted into a hundred seams like Mumfie's, my elephant doll's seams splitting and like his sand, her life-blood spilled out of all them. I slowed, dragging my feet to

look back over my shoulder. Nurse Harris jerked my arm.

"Come along," she said. "Don't dawdle."

After I had been in the orphanage for about a year, Mummy visited me. She looked pretty and slender in her brown wool dress and cloche hat. She brought me a new, red woollen dress. It looked cozy. But I knew it was a bribe. Had she meant to take me home, she wouldn't have brought a gift. She'd have simply said the magical words, "We're going home."

We went for a walk. Mummy took me by the hand and chatted brightly about our hairdressing shop in London. As she talked, I became homesick for the shop's sweet smell of shaving lotion and the sharp smell of ammonia for perms.

Mummy led me to a warm cafe, where I ate my favorite dish baked beans on toast. But the beans and toast were dry and stuck to the roof of my mouth. As usual, Mummy talked, I listened. Mummy could hear me but didn't listen. Daddy listened, but he was deaf and couldn't hear me.

After leaving the cafe, we stopped in a sweet shop. Mummy picked out a huge assortment of candies until the white bag bulged. Another bribe.

At the steps of the orphanage, Mummy said, "Goodbye," and kissed me on the lips. Her mouth, as always, smelled of the violet cashews.

Joan, the maid, took me into the kitchen. Cook gave me a

glass of hot milk. I vomited it all over the spotless stone floor. To my surprise, Cook and Sister didn't scold me. They exchanged a secret look. Sister said, "Go to bed now."
As I lay in the dark, a figure glided into our room and took my bag of sweets.

The next evening Mary, a big fat girl pushed Violet hard. Violet fell onto the rough wooden floor, legs sprawled. I heard a slap. Mary was holding a red cheek and screaming, "I'm telling. I'm telling," as she rushed out.

"Come to bed immediately," Nurse Harris shouted at me, her red face and huge bulk filling the doorway. "Go to the bathroom. Get in the bath with the infants," she said to me. She threw me a bar of stinking red carbolic soap, which only poor Christians used. Nurse Harris scrubbed me roughly until I was sore.

The next day Sister came into the dining room. As usual she carried the white, enamel bowl of porridge.

"Be quiet you children. I've got a splitting headache. Nurse Harris has come down with scarlet fever. I have to do all the work myself."

The following morning I awoke with a high temperature and ached all over. A red rash had spread over my body. I felt myself being lifted out of bed and then nothing. I awoke in a strange room. Pretty young nurses carrying thermometers, food, and chamber pots rustled up and down the long ward. I was in a hospital. It seemed to me I was there for about a week.

Upon my return to the orphanage Sister led me upstairs, skirts crackling. We reached another smaller winding staircase. At the top of the small stairs, we stopped at a plain wooden door. Sister pulled out a long iron key from her pocket, unlocked the door and threw it open.

"You'll have to stay in quarantine here for six weeks." Sister closed the door and locked it from the outside.

In the morning I walked barefoot in my nightie to the window and looked down at the long twin snow-topped fences and the white walkway between. The path was encrusted with a pure white sugar-like sheet of frost, not even a footprint in it. I pressed my nose to the window, breathed on the window and wrote, "Mummy," in the steam. I waited for hours, hoping to see her. I wondered if she'd forgotten me altogether. Did she know I'd had scarlet fever, that I was in the attic?

After what seemed like months, the sun, now a pale lemon, peeped out shyly. The snow on the tall fence along the tradesmen's entrance slowly began to melt. I thought it must be March. I'd been in the orphanage for more than a year. I felt as thin and light as a snowflake.

One day, without warning, Mummy and Aunty Regina appeared in the attic. I'd never before seen them together. Mummy, petite, dark haired, dark eyed, excited, and excitable like Booba, and Aunty Regina tall, blonde, blue eyed, calm, like Zada my grandfather, were total opposites in looks and character. I flung

myself into Mummy's arms, buried my face in her little mink collar.

Mummy and Aunty sat smiling, chatting to each other over my head. I sensed that she didn't plan to take me home. I knew that if I didn't escape now I never would.

Tears were the only weapon I knew that might move the hearts of these two women who sat there smiling and chatting, ignoring me. I didn't feel like crying, though. My heart felt like stone. But I squeezed my face up, whimpered and pretended to wipe tears away from my tearless face. By thinking hard about crying, I was able to force out two tears.

"I want to go home," I sniffled. "Take me home."

Fingers over my eyes I secretly watched their faces. The two sisters looked at each other. Aunt Regina nodded faintly. The fact that they were so casual about taking me home, as if I were a stray dog, and that Aunty, not Mummy, made the decision, made me rage inside. But I couldn't let them know.

"I have to get Mumfie."

It was a terrible risk. They might leave without me. But I couldn't leave without Mumfie, my stuffed elephant. Nor could I leave without showing the other children that *I* had a real mother and a real beautiful blonde aunty and they had *both* come for me.

Now full of strength, I ran all the way down to the common room. All the children sat at the table with upright backs eating from tin plates. Sister wasn't there. I ran past the

children to the platform at the end where our toys were piled. All their heads turned in silent curiosity to watch me.

As the children all stared, I snatched up Mumfie and ran laughing, crying and hiccupping to my two relatives who were waiting outside the dining room to take me home.

I stopped only at Violet, who sat silently on the bench. Her head had dropped on her chest, her eyes were closed. I threw my arms round her and kissed her.

"Goodbye, Violet," I said. She burst into tears.

I ran back the length of the common room and threw myself into the arms of my waiting mother and aunt. I looked back at the children. "See how much I'm wanted?" I wanted to shout to them.

I spent several glorious months at home. Aunt Regina had married Uncle Adrian and I'd been a bridesmaid, dressed in white chiffon and silver lame, with long white gloves. The photograph showed a proud little girl, standing in front of my tall, beautiful blonde aunt and taller dark Uncle Adrian.

My friend Joycey and I roamed East London as usual. We played games in Shoreditch cemetery after school, and almost every day I borrowed two books from the library. I loved to hang around the shop, watching Mummy doing sets and perms, Daddy giving shaves, haircuts and hot towels. I often visited my grandparents, aunts and uncles. I was so happy.

It was about July or August when, for the second time, Mummy dropped me at the great front door of the orphanage. She never explained why. All the time I was enjoying myself during the summer, with no school, I must have been a nuisance to her. She knocked on the front door and with a wave of her white lacy handkerchief she ran back to the train. Joan opened the door.

"You know your way to the playroom," she said.

I stopped outside the common room. After the wonderful summer of freedom in London, I hated going into the playroom, but there was no choice. I felt ashamed. Everyone would see I'd been sent back, that I was unwanted. Unlike the other children, I had a mother, but like Gretel's, she kept trying to rid herself of me.

I walked slowly into the common room. All of the windows had been taken out of their frames. Big Mary, taller and fatter than ever sat crouched on the empty window sill. Her great bum hung outside in space, her fat legs dangling inside the room looking like a huge toad. A smirk of pleasure spread over her wide face.

"Thought they wanted you back but they tricked you, took you home for a little while to shut you up, and brought you back. They don't want you."

I rushed at her, and grabbing her fat ankles, pushed her feet up and shoved her out of the window. She screamed as she went down, shoes upward.

"I'm telling," Mary screamed, from somewhere under the window. She climbed back up, and heaved her bulk over the window sill. "You little kike, I fell into stinging nettles, I'm itching all over. I'm going to get you for this, see if I don't."

I didn't care.

I returned to the same old boring routine, Sister rushing in every morning, with the bowl of lumpy porridge and screaming, "Be quiet you children I've got a splitting headache." We formed a crocodile every morning and walked through the same streets, watching other children with their mothers, to school.

But Violet had gone, I didn't know where. I was lonelier than ever. Every night I held Mumfie tightly.

Some new boys of thirteen or fourteen had come to the orphanage. Like most English boys they still wore short trousers but their faces were hard.

One day in the common room one of these big boys, Ernie, dragged a small boy, Peter, over to the wall. Ernie stood six-year old Peter against the wall, laced his fingers into Peter's, over his head, then bent them back, hard. I heard a crack and saw blood spurt inside the skin between Peter's joints. Peter screamed.

"You broke his fingers," I cried, running out of the room.

"If you tell, I'll break yours," Ernie yelled, running after

me, feet pounding on the flagstone courtyard. My heart hammering with fear, I rushed into the kitchen.

"Ernie broke Peter's fingers," I gasped.

"Wait here," cook said, and rushing out collided with Ernie. She took hold of him by one ear and dragged him, shouting, through the baize door to the warden.

The next day after breakfast the warden came into the common room, his pink face now dark-red. He carried a big stick with a long pointed nail sticking out of it.

"Come here," he said to Ernie.

The boy sauntered over to the warden hands in pockets.

"Take your hands out of your pockets when an adult speaks to you," snapped the warden. "Stand straight."

The boy stopped smirking and did as he was told.

"Stand facing the wall, hands on the wall over your head."

Ernie sniggered but put his bony hands on the wall. The warden raised the stick and with the nail pointing toward Ernie brought it down hard on the boy's behind.

"One for each finger you broke," he shouted, striking Ernie ten times. Ernie screamed.

Several weeks passed. Slowly a few children disappeared each day. From thirty we shrunk to twenty-five. The common room grew emptier and emptier. Soon there were only fifteen, then ten, then eight children. Finally there were only three of us.

And then just me. Mummy took me home only because the orphanage was closing. We didn't speak the entire train journey back. Mummy sulked.

It was late summer of 1935. I'd decided never again to show anyone I was afraid, ashamed or that I needed them. Grown ups only fooled you into thinking they loved you, then dumped you in an orphanage. It was *especially* those you loved who hurt you the most. I would never again love anyone, I promised myself. I tried not to love Mummy. But I had no one else.

I was just six.

4

The Pettits

A different billeting officer led me to my new foster family. We crossed a green field right in the center of the town.

"This is the Heath, or the Newmarket Commons," she said. "See the little man?"

How could I help seeing him? He was tiny and dressed in a pink, green, yellow, blue, and silver suit with a cap to match. He thundered by on a horse so close the horse's hair brushed my arm. I jumped with fright.

"Is he an elf?" I said.

"Elf? Of course not. The little man is a jockey, and the horse is called Lucky Diamond."

I supposed this was country life. A little further on, a black man dressed in an Indian Chief's headdress stood on a box shouting down to a crowd of men, "Gentlemen, place your bets."

Some men handed the Indian Chief money every few minutes.

"Who's that?" I asked the billeting officer. She looked at me severely through her steel rimmed glasses. She was older than the first billeting officer.

"That's Prince Monolulu, taking bets on the horses," she said, pulling her mouth down. "He's a famous bookie. As if we need someone like him in Newmarket. The wog."

I thought a wog must be something to do with horse-racing.

Why was she such a sourpuss about a bookie? My Uncle Daniel, Daddy's brother, was a bookie. He had a beautiful big house. He was rich. I thought it was a respectable trade.

"We have to cross the Commons," the woman said, as we walked across the field. "The Commons used to be the place where all the people grazed their sheep in the Middle Ages. Now, jockeys like to race their horses across it. Newmarket is one of England's most famous horse-racing centers."

Lucky Diamond dropped steaming turds as he ran. I was not used to these glossy horses. I was used to seeing the Clydesdales in London, except the Clydesdales trotted slowly, elegantly. As they lifted their hooves they pointed their toes. These Newmarket racehorses looked as if they'd robbed a bank and were running away with the robber on their backs.

The Pettit home was simple but clean. Downstairs there was a scullery for cooking, a kitchen for eating (as at home), a front room facing on the street with a piano and an aspidistra, and upstairs, three bedrooms.

Mr. Pettit was a tall, broad, slow-moving man of maybe fifty. He hardly ever spoke. When he did, he always stopped to think first. A sepia picture of him, too, as a soldier in the first World War hung on the wall. He was the fourth person I knew of who'd been in the Great War, along with Mummy, the one-legged man on Bethnal Green Road, and the Ancliffes' son, Timothy. Mr. Pettit had a deep round scar on the left side of

his nape.

"I got a bullet in the neck in the war," he told me proudly, pointing to his scar. That was the first time he spoke to me. Strong and silent, he hardly spoke to anyone except his wife.

Mr. Pettit called his wife, "Mother," so I never knew her first name. Mrs. Pettit usually called her husband, "Father," but sometimes Andrew. I called them Mr. or Mrs. Pettit.

Mrs. Pettit was a plump motherly woman. Their older son, Alec, was away in the army. Ron, a lively scamp with dark hair and an impish smile, was two years younger than I. One winter day after school, as I was going up the darkening stairs, a ghostly figure covered in white jumped out at me and shouted, "Yaroo."

"I'm not scared," I quavered. I wasn't going to show the white blob springing out of nowhere that I was shivering in my shoes. I had tried not to believe in ghosts. Sister, at the orphanage had said sternly, "There's no such thing as ghosts." She'd torn up the letter I'd written to Mummy saying I'd heard there were ghosts at the orphanage. "Write another letter," she said.

"Come on, let's play the piano," Ron yelled, the next day as he pulled me into the front room. It was called the front room because it faced on the street, and like our living room, it had the best furniture and a piano in it. No one ever used the front room, though, except to play the piano. Every front room I knew

in Newmarket had a piano, an aspidistra in the window and a front door. But we always came in through the back door. Neither was locked. No one locked their doors then, in the daytime, not even in London. In the country they didn't even lock their doors at night. Sitting side-by-side on the piano bench Ron and I banged out war songs and sang at the top of our voices:

Roll out the barrel,
We'll have a barrel of fun,
Roll out the barrel,
We've got the Huns on the run

I especially liked:

Bless 'em all, bless 'em all, the long,the short and the tall,
Bless all the sergeants and W.O. ones,
Bless all the corporals and their blinking sons,'cause I'm saying goodbye to them all,
As back to their village they crawl,
They'll get no promotion this side of the ocean
So cheer up my lads, Bless em all

Every evening at six o'clock the Pettits turned on the wireless to hear the news. Mr. Pettit smoked a cigarette and rubbed his stubbly chin. Their son Alec was abroad somewhere.

"I wonder where he is, Father," Mrs. Pettit often said to her husband. "I pray to God he's safe," she always said after the news.

"Oh aye," Mr. Pettit said.

"Mr. Rawlings got called up yesterday," Mrs. Pettit said to her husband when he came home from work the next evening. I believed he was a laborer.

"Oh, ah, each day someone else," he said. "I've done my bit, Mother."

After dinner Mrs. Pettit and I often sat near the fire and knitted khaki balaclavas for the troops. I'd learned to knit in school when I was seven.

After the news this night, Gracie Fields, the famous singer, sang in her hard, high, perfect voice.

Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye,
Cheerio, here I go, on my way,
Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye,
With a cheer, not a tear, make it gay.
Give me a smile I can keep all the while
In my heart while I'm away.
'Till we meet once again, you and I,
Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye

I was sorry when a girl at school told me Gracie Fields was a fascist.

"Are you sure?" I asked. She said she was sure.

Vera Lynn sang with a special break in her voice. Her song brought tears to my eyes.

We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when
But I know we'll meet again some sunny day.

She had long blonde hair hanging over one side of her face. All the women who could copied her.

"Did you hear about Jeanie," Mrs. Pettit said to her husband that night. "She was working in the munitions factory, her hair got caught in the machinery. Fair scalped her."

"Humph. Girls didn't oughter wear their hair hangin' down in front of their faces like film stars," Mr. Pettit said.

"The women in the factories have to tie their hair up in scarves or turbans from now on," Mrs. Pettit said, putting out the cards for our Wednesday cribbage game. I liked the bright King and Queen of Hearts and the dark Knight of Diamonds.

In the winter of 1939, there was no central heating and coal was rationed. Only the kitchen had a fire in it. If we left the room, we could see our own breath. With lack of coal, we needed warm clothes, but fabric was rationed as well. We dressed in double sweaters in the house.

In the street women wore the pixie hat, a small pointed hat that took little material--or a scarf folded into a triangle, tied in a knot under the chin. Even Princess Elizabeth visiting the troops or treading carefully over the ruins of blitzed houses in London, in a show of sympathy, wore a scarf over her head and tied under her chin.

"You'll have to get used to margarine, and that's getting hard to come by," Mrs. Pettit said. "They've rationed butter to two ounces a week, enough for one good breakfast. You'll have to do with cheddar, there's no other cheese available."

"And what's wrong with cheddar, Mother?" Mr. Pettit said.

There'd been about ten cars in the streets of Newmarket when I arrived. By winter there were almost none because of the petrol rationing. We went everywhere on foot. We didn't need buses except to leave Newmarket, and we had no reason to leave the town. Evacuees weren't allowed to visit London except by

special permission.

I missed playing on the Shoreditch Church steps and reading in its cemetery on cool stone benches after school. I still missed my friend Joycey. I missed my parents, cool as they were, and my grandparents, aunt, and uncles. I even missed Zalman. Mummy wrote to me and said he had taken the widow who lived on Booba's landing out for tea. She had lost a husband and a child in Germany.

I missed the steamy, grimy East End of London. It was so quiet in the country, exactly as I'd feared. Nothing happened.

Mummy wrote to me, chatty letters about the shop and about Binkie, my cat, and I wrote back. She sent pocket money, sixpence. She also sent me comics. She was always good about writing when I was away. The only thing I looked forward to was the postman.

Someone brought a few sewing machines to the church and we learned how to sew. From a pile of fabrics all equally ugly and coarse, I chose some turquoise material. I immediately pricked my finger and bled on the dress I was making. They wouldn't give me new material. Silent tears trickled down my face. I never wore that dress and I never learned to use a sewing machine.

Finally, regular school lessons began. Our classes were held in a church. I felt better. Learning was something I was good at. Exercises were held in the local park. A photo shows me with other children in rows and columns in a crouched position,

our backs straight, our hands together pointed down between our legs.

I had been with the Pettits about two months. By then I felt at home in the Pettit house. After supper in winter, we often sat round the rough wooden table in the kitchen and played cribbage. I had my own place at the table. I was always the scorekeeper. Moving the tiny, smooth ivory pegs, I felt very important. Before bedtime Mrs. Pettit made everyone hot cocoa with a thick slice of bread and marge and a square inch of sharp cheddar cheese. It was a warm and cozy feeling to be with the whole Pettit family at night. They were good people, though they never became excited or kissed anyone.

Although Mummy wrote often, I was disappointed that my father didn't write. He'd written once and put at the bottom of the page, "Don't answer this letter and don't tell your mother that I wrote." My grandparents, aunt and uncles never wrote to me. My grandparents could only write Yiddish, but they could have asked my aunt or uncles to write for them. I felt as if they didn't care about me anymore. I was angry with them for abandoning me. Didn't they know their only grandchild was alone in the country, living among *goyim*? Why didn't one of them, just one of them, write to me?

Once a week Ron and I took a bath in a tin tub in front of the fire. Mrs. Pettit heated up kettles of water in the scullery and brought them into the kitchen. Ron had his bath first, while

I stayed in my room, and then he went up to bed. Then Mrs. Pettit hung towels on drying racks around the bath to give me privacy. She left me to bathe myself. The soap had no smell. There was already a shortage of perfumed, or for that matter, any soap. Mummy sent some black-market soap, soon used up.

"Come on, Mother, let's go to the allotment," Mr. Pettit said, one summer evening. Like many others, Mr. Pettit had a War Allotment, a small parcel of land rented from the government. Because of the rationing many people grew a few vegetables and fruits. All fruit from abroad disappeared. Ships were used only for war now.

"Dig for Victory," was written on six foot high posters. Beneath the large letters, healthy Land Army girls in khaki jodhpurs and sweaters leaned forward, their boots on pitchforks digging into the ground or throwing up hay to make a hay stack. Their eyes were always blue and earnest. They'd taken on the work of farmers gone to fight.

When we came to Mr. Pettit's allotment I found a small, fuzzy green fruit on the ground, a little bigger than an olive.

"Ooh, look, what a tiny little apple," I said.

Mr. and Mrs. Pettit exploded in laughter. "That's not an apple, that's a gooseberry, you gooseberry," Mr. Pettit laughed.

That was the second time Mr. Pettit ever spoke directly to me. We picked a lot of gooseberries and when we got home, Mrs. Pettit made a gooseberry pie for dessert. She often made tart

rhubarb or apple pies, with little sugar. Since sugar was rationed as well, I learned to like tart fruits and pies.

After dinner she said to me, "Here, have a sip of our elderberry wine," and poured some into a little glass. After two sips I became dizzy and staggered about. I didn't know why.

"You look so funny," the Pettits laughed, but not cruelly.

That first Christmas of 1939 away from home children sang an especially sad song:

> I'm sending a letter, to Santa Claus,
> A letter I hope he'll receive,
> Oh I wonder if he, will please remember me,
> When he comes on Christmas Eve.
> I've got a lot of letters and playthings like other girls and boys
> But I want my soldier Daddy, he's better than all the toys,
> And so I'm sending a letter to Santa Claus, to bring Daddy safely home to me.

As we were all feeling blue Mr. Pettit said to Mrs. Pettit, "Come on, Mother, I'm taking you to the pub."

It was a cold, frosty day. Mrs. Pettit immediately skewered on her hat with a long hatpin. Though they'd never left us alone before, Ron and I thought we were to stay home alone. But Mr. Pettit called out, "Come on, you two." Ron and I rushed to join them. I'd never gone out with the Pettits. For Ron, too, this was a big adventure.

Mr. Pettit went into the pub while Mrs. Pettit, Ron and I went directly to the ladies' section behind a frosted glass door. The women's section was empty. In it we found a beautiful long

shiny board on the table, about a foot wide and three feet long. Ron taught me "shove-'appeny," which meant shove a half-penny. With the heel of your hand, you could shove your halfpenny gently or hard to get it into the right square. Winners collected the ha'pennies. Of course, Ron was an old, experienced hand at this country pub game and beat me every time. He gleefully collected my halfpennies.

One morning Mrs. Pettit received a small, brown-paper-wrapped parcel tied with string.

"Look, my sister sent me some pre-war soap for my birthday," she said.

"Can I smell it?" I asked.

The two bars of soap were oval in shape like miniature blimps, smooth and silky to touch. I loved their scented, perfumed smell. Mummy and Aunty Regina always used Yardley's Lavender or Midnight in Paris powder.

"It smells beautiful," I said, holding Mrs. Pettit's smooth, scented soap to my nose. Mrs. Pettit gently took it from me and went upstairs with it. I just had to find that soap and smell it again. That afternoon, hunched down almost on all fours, I crept into the Pettits' bedroom. I always passed through it to get to mine but had never before stopped in it. There was a rough chest of drawers under their window. I stealthily pulled out the top drawer. I had to tug at it. It was hard to open and to my

dismay it creaked loudly. I put both hands inside the drawer and started feeling around the top clothes for a hard oval shape.

Suddenly the blankets on the bed reared up and Mr. Pettit's enormous gray head appeared over the top.

"What are you doing in our drawers?" he thundered.

"I'm looking for silver foil for the war effort," I lied, my voice shaking.

"Next time ask, and keep out of our drawers," he shouted and went back to sleep.

I hadn't known he napped in the daytime. It was probably a Saturday afternoon and he was off work. That was the third and last time he ever spoke to me. But he didn't stay angry.

Why did I lie? What could have been more innocent in our luxury-starved life than wanting to smell again something as delicious as perfumed soap? I suppose I didn't ask to smell the soap again because it would have seemed so silly to the Pettits. I didn't understand it myself. Perhaps it reminded me of home.

I longed for home, with all the familiar good smells of our hairdressing shop: the after-shave lotions, the scented powders, lipsticks and rouges. I longed for my mother's and aunt's delicate perfumes. I desperately missed my Jewish family and friends, my London.

Why did I have to be evacuated and live among strange, even kindly gentiles? I missed my mother and father, lax as they were as parents, my tart grandmother, glamorous aunt and dashing

uncles. Most of all, I missed my affectionate Zada. But I also missed the Jewish markets of Brick Lane and Petticoat Lane full of rich, sharp smells and lively action, jokes and laughter. I missed the Saturday rambles I'd once had with Joycey through East London. I missed my kitten Binkie. I missed Jewish food, chicken soup, stuffed chicken neck and roast potatoes for Shabbos, and the fried fish and chips Mummy made. I missed the beautiful scents from our hairdressing shop and Mummy's deep blue glass perfume bottles.

Smelling Mrs. Pettit's soap had reminded me of home and had comforted me. Alone in my bedroom I cried quietly and bitterly. I'd been away, living with the Pettits for two years.

One morning I received a letter from Mummy.

> Bombs are falling like billyho as I write. Many houses have been bombed, hundreds killed. Some of my friends are dead. The Germans are aiming for the docks, only a few miles away. A bomb fell next to us. The roof fell in and all the upstairs windows. But I refuse to go into shelters or the underground at night. If I'm going to die I want to die in my own bed. Let's hope the Nazis don't invade us. If they do, stay in the country and don't tell anyone you're Jewish. Try to stay with a gentile family.

I worried my parents might be killed in the bombing. I wished I could see them, but evacuees weren't allowed to go to London and they didn't come to me. I had to be satisfied with Mummy's weekly letters and the one letter Daddy sent saying, "Don't tell Mum I wrote to you. She doesn't like me writing to you."

I treasured his one letter throughout the war.

5

Wartime London

"Headmistress wants you," my teacher said.

I knocked on the headmistress's door, waited outside, heard the bell ping and entered. I stood on the oriental rug before her desk, hands clasped behind my back, feet together. What had I done? Grownups only called you when you'd done something wrong.

"You're now eleven, ready for the First Form of high school," Miss Crawford said. "You're to leave Newmarket and go to Ely, where your London high school, Spitalfields, is evacuated."

Miss Crawford's brown eyes had become more anxious during the war, her face longer and more horse-like. Her clothes hung on her.

I was sorry to leave the Pettits but excited, the first in my family, to be going to high school. I imagined there would be lots of warm, friendly families just like the Pettits in Ely.

"You're allowed to go to London for the weekend to buy your high school clothes. Be back by Monday. Congratulations on entering high school," the headmistress said.

"Thank you Miss Crawford," I said and left, closing the door quietly.

Very few girls or boys went to high school. There was a stiff entrance exam, the fees were high even for public high

school, and the winter and summer school uniforms and sports gear cost a lot. Almost no one from the East End went to high school, and virtually none went to college.

Delirious with joy I took the train home. I hadn't been to London nor seen my parents for two years. No one met me. I walked the mile home from Liverpool Street Station.

When I walked in Mum and Dad gave me a quick hug and a kiss, as if I'd been away for just a week instead of two years. I wanted more but thought I'd seem like a baby. I was eleven.

Everything looked the same except the upstairs windows had smashed in an air-raid and were boarded up.

"Part of the roof fell in, too," Mummy said. "No use repairing anything now, it could get bombed again. After the war we'll get paid for damages, I think."

"First we'll visit Booba, Zada, Uncle Sam, and Aunty Regina," Mummy said.

I longed to see my family, especially Zada and Aunt Regina.

"Pussy cat," she'd exclaim, hugging me to her scented breast, "How's my darling pussy cat?"

When I arrived at their shop, Booba and Uncle Sam were standing behind the marble counter. Zada was in the living room reading his *Forward* in Yiddish. Booba was as severe as ever as I leaned over the counter to kiss her cool cheek. She still didn't smile at me.

Uncle Sam was as sarcastic as ever.

"How's the big high school girl? Do you know what fragmented means? No? A girl going to high school and doesn't even know what fragmented means?"

"Uncle Sam, I haven't even started high school yet," I protested. I felt I'd failed him.

I went into the living room behind the shop and hugged my Zada. I was too big to sit on his lap, or have my tuchas pinched lovingly, but he did rub his stubbly cheek against mine and gave me a resounding kiss.

"*Ne, vus machs du kinderle*?" he asked affectionately. How are you, little one?

"Who's this I hear has come home?" I heard Aunty Regina's voice. I ran into her arms and hugged her to me as she entered the dining room. The fur pompons on her coat tickled my nose and I breathed in the heady smell of her rich perfume. Everything she wore was expensive. Her smooth blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes were as beautiful as ever.

"Oh, Aunty, how much I've missed you."

"And I've missed you too, pussy cat. My, what a big girl you've become."

I blushed because I'd sprouted small breasts.

"I hear you're going to high school soon."

"I'm just in London overnight to buy my uniform."

"Oh, what a pity. I'd have liked to take you to a play or to

the ballet, but Mummy says you have to go right back."

I nearly cried. I would have loved to go out with Aunty Regina. I knew she went to all the poshest restaurants and theaters in the West End, places Mummy and Daddy never went. When I grew up I wanted to be smart like Aunt Regina.

"Well, next time let us know you're coming and we'll go out somewhere fancy to tea. I have to go now, darling. Adrian is taking me to the opera tonight and I have to run up and change."

My aunt and all my relatives seemed distant. I wanted to ask why none of them had written to me. I thought of the letters I had written for refugees I knew in Newmarket. Every Sunday night an old Jewish couple who could only write Yiddish and whose daughter could only read English, dictated a letter to me. Zada, who wrote Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and Russian could have dictated a letter to my uncle and aunt. Any of them could have even visited me. Newmarket was only two hours from London. I feared that the longer I was evacuated, the more they'd forget me.

Mummy had changed. In spite of clothes rationing she was dressed more smartly. But she had a funny look in her eye. She was gay and charming and witty but she often suddenly stopped and became angry over nothing.

Daddy looked the same. He dressed smartly, maintained his slim figure, and kept his little black mustache neat. But he hardly spoke. I supposed he did the same things as he had before

the war. His life consisted of reading, barbering, eating or sleeping. Wednesdays he went to the wholesalers for supplies, and Sundays he often went to the open air markets or to the museums. My parents almost never went out together. Mummy felt someone always had to be with the shop. The shop was their baby, just as Booba's shop was hers.

Sometimes Dad and Mummy talked. Often Mummy screamed at him for something I thought was trivial. He'd lay down on the kitchen sofa, pull the blanket over his head, and go to sleep.

Once, while I was home and Mummy was in the shop, he spoke to me. "Your mother's suffered a lot in the bombing," he said quietly. "Be patient with her."

I didn't know what he meant. I couldn't ask him without shouting. She'd hear.

The morning after my arrival, Mummy and I took the number six bus to the West End. The area was teeming with British soldiers, sailors, airmen, Free Polish and French Free Fighters, as well as Australian, New Zealand and Canadian soldiers. We also saw the Jewish Brigade---Israeli and European Jews who fought for the British. They were all out on the town on leave, loaded with money, desperately anxious to have a good time before being shipped out. They acted as if they might never come back. Thousands of girls clung to their arms. Many of the girls were in civvies, some in the khaki uniform of the WATS and others in the navy and white of the WRENS. The WRENS looked dishy in their

smart suits and navy and white admiral-like hats.

"If the war goes on long enough, you could become an officer in the WRENS," Mummy said, smiling. "Only girls with a high school education can join the WRENS. You'd look wonderful in a WREN uniform."

I stared at Mother. I didn't know much about the war, but Mother wanting it to go on for the sake of a smart uniform upset me. Thousands of young men were being wounded and killed in battle daily. We'd heard reports that the Nazis were rounding up and killing Jews all over Europe. Why would anyone *want* the war to go on?

The West End seethed with gaiety. I barely remembered it before the war, when it had been the playground of the rich, drive about by chauffeurs, in Rolls Royces or Bentleys. Women had dressed in silks and furs, the men in top hats and evening clothes. I'd only been to the West End with Mummy once, when I was about seven. We'd walked around and looked in shop windows. Mummy never dared go into a shop or restaurant in the West End as Aunty Regina did. Aunt Regina had taken me to tea in Harrods and other posh places.

One day before the war Mummy and I had watched an enormous car stop outside Harrods. A chauffeur in a black uniform and cap jumped out and opened the door. A long silk leg, a silk shoe, the frothy hem of a red chiffon dress appeared, then a mink coat and finally, a beautiful woman in a stunning hat and black veil

slid out of the car. A rich *goyishe* man swanned out after her.

"Don't wait, Harris, we're going to lunch then for cocktails. Pick us up at six at the Ritz to change, then we'll be going to Lady Ashton's for dinner," the woman said carelessly.

"Very good, Madam," Harris said.

Mummy and I stood there open-mouthed. The woman smelled like Lily of the Valley as she passed without noticing us.

We walked past splendid hotels like palaces with a uniformed man standing outside each. One restaurant, called Indian Ambassador, had a giant, six-foot Indian standing outside. He wore a huge turban, gorgeous silk clothes, and a wicked curved knife with a jewelled handle in his waistband.

It had become dark. A million lights had come on, dazzling us. Rouged and perfumed women in long dresses with glittering diamonds in their hair and at their throats, and men in evening clothes, silk top hats, and flying white silk scarves, emerged from enormous cars striding into hotels, restaurants and theaters. I gawked up in awe at the brilliant electric advertisement of a giant Johnny Walker, his long red lit-up legs walking, on a hotel wall in Piccadilly. That was all I remembered of the West End before the war.

Now, with clothes rationing and a new spirit of equality, most people wore uniform or drab civvies. Few people turned out in tails and long evening dresses, even when it grew dark.

Because of petrol rationing, there were few cars and fewer taxis than before the war. Their lights, as well as those of the restaurants, theaters, and hotels were all dimmed at night. But I still loved the aura of wealth and excitement, the elegant, expensive shops and the crowds of the West End.

In Piccadilly Circus, Eros had been boarded up and sandbagged in case he was bombed. The God of Love's statue stood on one leg like Peter Pan his cupid's bow poised to shoot an arrow of love into a youth's heart. A symbol of British impudence, we couldn't let the Germans destroy him.

"Aunty Regina works around here," Mummy said. We were passing Bond Street, the fanciest and most expensive street in the West End for clothes and jewelry. Many of the shops had standing in front of them uniformed doormen too old for the draft. The young men had all been called up.

"Pity she couldn't marry that boss of hers, Raphael," Mummy said. "They were so much in love."

"Why didn't they marry?" I asked.

"*Nadn*. Aunty Regina had no dowry. Or not enough. His family wouldn't let him marry a poor girl. Aunty Regina waited and waited but the family didn't change their minds, and Raphael wouldn't go against their wishes. Or maybe they threatened to cut him out of the business if he did. Aunty Regina finally gave up and married Uncle Adrian. Remember the wedding?"

"How could I forget? I wore my first long dress, all silver

and white," I said. "How old was I, seven?"

That had been another wonderful experience during my two years in London between the orphanage and the war. Aunty Regina was the most beautiful woman I knew. I desperately wanted to be like her. But I could never be tall, blonde and blue-eyed like her. I took after my mother who was petite, with brown hair and hazel-eyes. But one day, I vowed, I would wear expensive clothes, hats and perfume like Aunty Regina, and not the simple little dresses with Peter Pan collars that Mummy wore. I'd be a bold adventuress like Aunt, gamble and buy beautiful things like my father. I'd never be like my timid mother, afraid to take chances, whose own mother, Booba, was so cold to her but so good to Aunt Regina.

We headed toward Marshall and Snelgrove where we'd buy my school uniform. Sandbags were piled all around the shops and big buildings in the West End, the windows all criss-crossed with tape in case of flying glass. After a slow start, German bombing had been savage. Many shop windows were smashed and not yet put back. Some shops didn't bother to put the windows back at all--they'd only be bombed to smithereens again. Salesgirls stood in the shop fronts right next to the mannequins.

"Looting Prohibited," said a sign over a bombed shop.

"There's almost no looting," Mummy said. "There's a wonderful sense of camaraderie among Londoners. In spite of constant bombing, our morale is high. We all help each other."

Mummy was speaking above the din of crowds, buses, and taxis of the West End. I loved all the city noises.

We shouldered our way through the mobs. We kept getting bumped by the crowds of laughing servicemen and their girls who all seemed to be going in the opposite direction to us. We were pushed and shoved on all sides. I loved it. I hadn't had any human touch for two years.

Occasionally we'd pass a young serviceman on crutches or with his arm in a sling. I'd look at him in awe. He was like the man from the First World War, the one-legged soldier who stood holding out one pencil to sell all day, in Bethnal Green Road. That man had been young once, like these soldiers. Would these young men end up selling pencils in the street? I wondered what had happened to Mummy's friend, "Aunt" Ellen's Tom with his missing four fingers. He probably still lived with her.

Finally we entered a crowded Marshall and Snelgrove. I'd never been in such a posh shop before. The floors and stairs were all carpeted. Not even the biggest department shop in the East End, Wickhams, where Mummy often took me Wednesday afternoons, half-day closing, before the war, had carpeted floors.

We went upstairs, looking all around us.

"Can I help you, Madame?" said a tall, well-dressed lady. She was middle aged, older than Mummy. She spoke English like an upper class woman. The younger women were either in the services

or had taken men's jobs while they were in the services. Many women were working for the first time in their lives.

"We need the winter and summer uniform for Spitalfields High School," Mummy said grandly.

"Yes, Madame," said the tall lady. Mummy cringed a little.

I was excited about having the high school uniform. It was a mark of distinction. Only girls or boys who passed stiff entrance examinations were admitted to high school. My scholarship paid for all my fees, as well as a stipend, which we used to pay for my uniform.

The woman came back with a huge pile of clothes. After her initial snobbishness she was quite nice. For winter we bought two school uniform button-up beige blouses with collars, a navy pleated tunic to go over the blouse and a green, red-striped tie. The tunic came with a braided girdle ending in two tassels, which tied around the waist of the gym tunic. Although it was called a gym tunic, we never used it for gym. We wore it every day with the blouse and tie, and for hockey, rounders (baseball), and tennis. It came just to my knees and bounced out beautifully as I walked. Then we bought the navy blue school blazer with gold buttons and "*Spe, Labore, Fide*," "With Hope, Work and Faith," embroidered on the top left pocket. I also needed the school hat, which was made of soft velour and had a green band and a red stripe running through the middle, with a red shield and the school motto in the center of it.

Mother also bought me the required thick lisle stockings and a garter belt to hold them up. I'd never worn stockings or a garter belt before. We bought solid brown brogues with a fringed tongue hanging out, Wellington boots for rain and the required flat indoor shoe with one strap across the instep. I would have to change into these as soon as we got to school, I was told. We bought plimpsols for gym and sports, socks for the summer. For the winter we had to buy the school's green sweater with red stripes at the neck and wrists.

The summer uniform was an emerald green cotton dress with a cream collar, and a red band round it. We were allowed to wear socks and sandals in the summer. We also had to buy a good tennis racquet and a hockey stick for games. Though I was athletic and a champion skipper I had never played team sports.

All the clothes probably came to at least a hundred, possibly two hundred pounds--a lot of money then. We couldn't possibly have done it without the scholarship and stipend money, I thought. I tried on the uniform, Mummy inspecting me from head to toe and from front to back.

"When everyone is dressed the same, you can't tell the rich girls from the poor girls," Mummy said. "Yours is a very old school. It was started by the men in the Spitalfields Vegetable Market about 1500 or maybe 1600, for children who couldn't afford to pay for a high school education. Other guildsmen like coopers, skinners, and haberdashers also began schools for poor

children. Those are now Coopersmiths, Skinners, and Haberdashers High schools. They all have excellent reputations. You'll have to work hard."

I was impressed by how much Mummy knew about high schools. I hoped she felt good that even if she hadn't been allowed by her mother to go to high school, I could. The one thing Mummy fought for me was my education.

I wished I could run over to Joycey and show her all my new clothes, but I was sure she wouldn't see me. She was right about us becoming different. When I told her I'd been accepted into high school she said, "You and me can't be friends no more. We'll be too different." I'd been crushed at the time but she was right. I felt different already. I was headed for high school and university. Joycey was headed for the box factory. We would grow worlds apart.

I wouldn't know any of the girls or teachers at Spitalfields. What would Ely be like? What would my new foster parents be like? I assumed they would be nice like the Pettits. These thoughts crowded my mind as we carried our huge bundles and boxes to the Number 6 bus and rode home.

My last night in London I was awakened by an air-raid warning. Its deafening, wailing cry made shivers go up and down my spine. I'd been sleeping in my old bed in the living room. I

could hear the German Junkers and Messerschmidts overhead. Our own planes had a steady roar, but the German planes throbbed, *throb, throb, throb*, like a heart beating very loudly--just as mine was beating. Suddenly a deafening explosion, a WHUMPF, shook the house and I jumped out of bed.

"Mummy," I cried.

"Come downstairs to the cellar," Mummy said, coming into my room. Daddy still slept. He probably couldn't hear the bombs. For once his deafness was useful. He refused to get out of bed.

Mummy shoved me through the door under the stairs where our coal was kept. Our feet scrunched on the coal as we crouched down, Mummy's body over mine. The bombs kept WHUMPING down one after the other, followed by an explosion which rattled the windows. I began to shiver. I wished we'd gone to a proper Anderson shelter or to the underground. I'd heard that lots of people took their bedding and food down there. They'd chat and sing and then all go to sleep. It was one of the safest places to be in during a raid. Mummy refused to go there among the riffraff, as she called them.

"If I'm going to die, I'm going to die in bed."

If I hadn't been home she wouldn't have left her bed.

We crouched in the inky dark cellar. The house rattled and shook. I heard glass breaking. I was afraid to breathe. I could feel Mummy's warm body over mine. I thought then that perhaps she really did love me. Wasn't she protecting my body with her

own? Or was that the only way we'd both fit in the small space? One great WHUMP sounded close. I whimpered. Then there was quiet.

Finally a long, mournful wail sounded.

"All clear," Mummy muttered.

We got up from our cramped position and went outside. Mummy's face was black from coal dust. I supposed mine must be, too. The moon was shining as always, the stars glittered. Searchlights still criss-crossed the skies looking for the Jerries. In the distance, flames licked the dark sky, smoke rose above the houses.

"They always come on a moonlit night," Mummy said. "I think they got the docks. I hope the Frosts are all right. I'll pop round and see them tomorrow."

In the morning, bleary-eyed, we both went round to the Frosts. The outline of their narrow staircase against an inner wall showed what was left of their flat. The outer wall was gone. A white apron, now blackened, had caught on a pipe and fluttered out like a surrender flag. A high pile of smoking rubble stood where their flat had been. Jagged pieces of broken furniture lay tossed about. Already the ARP, Air Raid Personnel, and rescuers were digging through the smoking pile. They pulled out Harry's cap.

"Did you know the Frost family?" Mummy asked a man in torn clothing standing by. "Do you know if they went to the shelter

last night?"

"I don't fink they ever went to the shelters," the grimy cockney said. "Ain't no chance they came froo this. This wos all on fire last night it wos. They're dead. Wot--you relatives or somefink?" he asked.

"Just friends," Mummy said, and walked away.

She was crying. I began to cry, too.

"Very old friends," Mummy said. "Now you see why we sent you away?" Mummy said. "We sent you for your own good."

I still felt she sent me away just to get rid of me, but of course I couldn't say so.

I mourned the Frosts. I remembered how spunky Mrs. Frost had rained down bottles on the heads of the police at the Cable Street Battle. I'd been there with Uncle Max when the Fascists tried to march through the Jewish East End. I remembered how 600,000 Jews, unionists, socialists and communists rallied and turned them back. I remembered Harry with his intelligent face, his neat dress and huge hump, and Toby, widow Frost's daughter who supported the family as a seamstress, with her plain face and the wart on her nose. The Nazis had killed them as surely as they'd killed many Jews in Europe.

I still didn't understand why the Nazis hated Jews so much. What had we done to them? My parents hardly knew they were Jews. I knew I was one mainly because the Fascists always reminded us of it. It didn't matter to the Nazis whether one was a

practicing Jew or not, though. They'd kill us anyway. If they got the chance. We were sure they couldn't conquer England.

Chapter 6

Ely and High School

On a dark, blustering Sunday night in September of 1941 Mummy and I arrived at Ely. It had taken us two hours to get there. But for the stationmaster, the station was deserted. He had just fastened his bicycle clips around his trouser cuffs and was hooking a leg over his bicycle, about to leave. He pointed out the way to the home of teachers who would take me to my new foster parents.

"Lucky he was there to give us directions because we haven't seen a soul since we left the station," Mummy said as we bent our heads against the heavy winds. The worn suitcase I shlepped bumped against my thigh, the gas mask against my hip. Old newspapers gusted up from the ground, wrapping themselves round our legs. We came to the deserted town square. The whole of Ely seemed desolate. I was already depressed at its emptiness. Between spaces in the buildings I saw a looming giant. I'd heard there was a famous cathedral in this town. I knew, too, that inside there would be a gigantic organ, bigger than the one I'd seen while at the orphanage, with little mouths. In the searchlights I saw Ely Cathedral's giant blackness and immediately hated it. On one side of the market square stood the single town cinema and on the other three sides shops, all closed. Because of the blackout, everything was dark and quiet. Another country town. Searchlights were scouring the skies for

enemy planes, crisscrossing the heavens providing what little light there was. Otherwise the town was pitch-black, silent and dead.

We fought the wind on our way to a tall, narrow house where mother knocked on the door. It was immediately flung open.

"Come in, come in," said a lady with pink skin, white hair piled like fluff on top of her head, and buck teeth. She quickly closed the door behind us so no lights would show. "Come to the fire, you look frozen. I am Miss Winifred Fry, the History teacher, and this is my sister, Miss Abigail Fry."

She waved her hand at a younger version of herself. The sister had dark brown hair braided in circles over her ears like Elizabeth Browning, but she was older than the poetess, with a surly face as she bent to clear away the remains of tea and cake. Two snotty looking girls, dressed in my school uniform-to-be, stared at me haughtily as if I were an interloper.

It was the first time I'd seen the school uniform on girls. It looked crisp and high class. The snots were standing in front of the roaring fire, chins up, hands clasped behind their back like queens, blocking off all the heat.

As Miss Fry drew Mummy and me to the fire, the two girls reluctantly moved away, pouting. Their short gym tunics flounced as they moved. In front of the fire stood a table, on which rested a large board that took up almost all the space in the small room.

"The girls and I were just playing Monopoly. Have a cup of tea, and then we'll show you how to get to the Lupsons. Abigail," Miss Winifred Fry said, "Please bring Mrs. Moss and her daughter a cup of tea, quickly."

Abigail shot her older sister a murderous look, but hobbled sideways like a crab to the kitchen, seething and mumbling under her breath. She returned shortly, shoving a cup of tea at Mummy and another at me.

"We're very grateful, thank you, it's so terribly cold for September. Is it always as cold here at this time of year?" Mummy asked.

"Oh, it's a little colder than usual. We're used to it. We've been here for two years, you know," said Miss Fry, Senior. She gave us one minute to gulp down the hot sugarless tea.

"Are you ready? Good, then Abigail will show you how to get to the Lupsons. It's time for you to go, too, gels," she said to the two schoolgirls who stood staring coldly at me.

Abigail, muttering to herself, got into her shabby brown coat and a dented old brown felt hat, rammed a hatpin into it--through her brains I was sure--and led the way back into the blustering street. I didn't blame her for not wanting to go out or for hating her domineering older sister. I imagined her stabbing Winifred with the hatpins when she returned.

The moon was cold and forbidding. I never did like the moon, so pale and icy looking. I shivered. I began to feel homesick for

the Pettits.

For such a crabbed woman, Abigail Fry walked very fast.

"This is the Lupson house," she said, stopping at a low door, and disappeared into the darkness.

A woman of about thirty with a shiny face and greasy black hair answered our knock. She stood back silently to let us in. The dark room was full of smoke. She was frying chips in a black pan with almost no oil. I was used to seeing deep vats of oil in the London fish and chip shops, and the deep pan of oil in which Mummy fried fish and chips for Friday dinner.

The woman's hands were bloody. I was shocked. I saw behind her a rabbit on the kitchen table, its gentle eyes wide and its belly slit open, spilling blood. Its bowels lay in a heap beside it. I'd seen rabbits hanging upside-down in the gentile butcher shops, but I'd only seen women pulling out the bowels of kosher chickens, and there was no blood. Jews aren't allowed to eat blood. I knew Booba drained the blood and salted the animal before cooking it. Seeing the rabbit's blood and entrails I retched, but nothing came up. No one took any notice. The Lupsons were busy looking Mummy and me up and down. We looked like Londoners and they looked like country people. I longed for the Pettits, who had been warm and friendly. I felt instantly that these people were cold.

I noticed a gun in the corner.

"Well, I have to catch my train, goodbye," Mummy said, and

hurried out of the door. No white hanky waved this time.

A man and a young girl of about ten, who looked at me suspiciously, sat at the table waiting for their dinner.

"Are you cooking chips, they're my favorite," I said, trying to break the thick ice.

Mrs. Lupson stared at me, silently.

The girl came over to me and rummaged in my hair with her hands.

"If you're looking for lice, I don't have any," I said.

"Where are your horns. I thought all Jews had horns," the girl said.

"Come and sit down, Elsie," her mother said.

Mrs. Lupson put out some blackened chips for her family and--grudgingly--me. That was dinner. I supposed the rabbit was for the following day.

"There's another evacuee here, an Irish Jew," Elsie said. "Moira. She's asleep. Went to bed early."

"I didn't know there were Jews in Ireland."

"They're all over the bloody place," Mrs. Lupson said.

Mr. Lupson was tall and thin, had an intelligent face and nice gray eyes. But he never said a word.

"Here, take this candle. First door up the stairs. Blow it out when you're in bed," Mrs. Lupson said.

I crept up the winding stairs. The door creaked open. I was glad to find another evacuee there, though she was asleep.

She looked pretty as she slept with her dark, tousled head and long, dark lashes against her cheek. I undressed quickly and climbed into bed with her. It didn't seem so lonely, even if she was Irish and asleep. In the morning Mrs. Lupson banged on the door, waking us.

"Oh," Moira said, "you're the new evacuee. Welcome."

I liked her instantly. She had a mop of thick dark curly hair and dimples in her cheeks, though her eyes were serious. The day was cool but bright and sunny. Perhaps because of Moira Ely didn't seem as depressing as it had the night before.

I put on my new school uniform, knotting the tie carefully over my blouse, the way Daddy had shown me. I was proud to be a high school girl with a smart uniform. After a breakfast of cereal, bread and margarine, and tea, Moira and I set out for school.

As soon as I stuck my head out of the door, I saw the giant gray Ely Cathedral looming. I soon found to my horror that the cathedral was one of Miss Fry's favorite haunts. She took us into its giant maw almost every week, lecturing us about it until I knew the insides of Ely Cathedral by heart. Nothing held it together, she told us, but its own weight. This increased my fear. I never lost my terror that it would one day fall on me.

On the way to school, I asked Moira if Elsie had checked in her head for horns. She laughed and said yes.

"You'd think she'd have learned from you, that Jews don't

have horns," I said.

"Perhaps because I'm an Irish Jew, she thought I was an exception," Moira said dryly. It was strange hearing an Irish brogue on a Jewish girl.

School was held in Archer House, a former private mansion, which was close to the market square. Market day was held twice a week, Moira told me. My first day at school was a market day.

Men and women came in from the country to sell their fresh fruits and vegetables on stalls in a square around the market's edge. A few sellers were shouting their wares. They reminded me of Whitechapel on a Sunday morning, except that none of them were Jewish and they sold mainly food. In the Jewish open market, the barrow boys would sell anything from herring to used fur coats. I wished I was there in the lively din or in Petticoat Lane where people said they'd nick your watch as you entered the market and sell it to you as you left.

Since many items were already in short supply or rationed, there was a brisk business in the Ely market. A few stalls sold scarves or home-made jam, most sold fruit and vegetables, nothing much of interest to me--except for a contest. Everyone was going up to strangers and singing:

> K-k-k-k-katie, my beautiful Katie,
> You're the only one that I shall ever adore.
> I've hunted and sought you, and now I've caught you,
> So I'm claiming my five-pound bond reward.

If you sang this song to the right person, you won a five-

pound bond reward. Everyone was in a fever of excitement singing this song aloud to anyone they met. I was glad I'd arrived on market day and during the contest. It made coming to the dour Lupsons and living under the phantom cathedral a little more bearable.

Moira showed me the way to the ivy-covered school and we said goodbye. She went to another London school evacuated to Ely. Although she was originally from Dublin, her parents had moved to London before the war.

I followed the other girls in, all strangers.

"Where do we change shoes?" I asked a pimple-faced kid about my age, eleven.

"Follow me," she said, taking enormous strides.

"Are we supposed to take big steps in this school?"

"I take big steps to save leather for the war effort," she said. "I'm Rita Gillis."

Rita Gillis was short and wide with frizzy hair and a solemn face. She never smiled. But she showed me round the school the way Violet, when I was five, had shown me the ropes at the orphanage. Now I was eleven and felt just as strange.

I changed into my house shoes, did up the one button on the strap across the instep, put my outdoor shoes in the little cubby hole which had my name on it, and hung my coat and gas mask up on the hook, copying whatever Rita Gillis did.

"Prayers," she said.

I followed her to a large room. There were hundreds of strange girls sitting there. I recognized only one face, Rosie's from Mr. Kent's class at Wood Close, my first elementary school. Since we'd never been friends, it wasn't much comfort. She was still plump and red faced and her cheek still bulged with a sweet.

My new green and red wool sweater itched horribly and I couldn't scratch.

Suddenly all the girls stood up.

An older woman walked in and mounted the stage. She was an erect, stout lady, with huge breasts, rather motherly looking for a headmistress. All the headmistresses I'd seen so far had been skinny and spinsterish. Miss Menzies had frizzy gray hair and beautiful deep-set gray eyes.

"Good morning gels." Only the upper class said "gels."

"Good morning, Miss Menzies," everyone chanted.

"Sit down, gels."

We sat.

We said some prayers, then stood and sang a hymn:

> What heroes thou hast bred
> Oh England, my country,
> Amid the gallant dead
> That is thine
> Each with undaunted heart
> Playing his gallant part
> Making thee what thou art
> Mother of mine.

Then we sang:

> I vow to thee my country

All earthly things above
Entire and whole and perfect
The service of my love.
The love that asks no questions
The love that stands the test
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best. . ."

I didn't feel all that nationalistic. It didn't seem that long since the Cable Street battle where some of our finest British fascists had wanted to wipe out all us British Jews. I thought the hymns sounded arrogant but then we *were* still an Empire. We still had India, Canada, New Zealand, Israel, which the British called Palestine, and all the colonies, didn't we? We were still the British Empire on whom the sun would never set.

There was no reference to Jesus in our prayers and hymns since about eighty percent of the Spitalfield girls who were evacuated to Ely, were Jewish. The East End had a large poor, Jewish population. We girls were the first East End generation to have a high school education. Still, even if the fathers and mothers were lower class, uneducated Jews like my father, they read a lot and went to concerts, lectures, and museums.

"Our grandfathers revered *Jewish* education, the Torah," Moira told me at breakfast, "but this love of learning applies to all education." This was news to me. I had never heard of the Torah before. What was it?

I was dying to scratch. Miss Menzies was speaking.

"Something dreadful has come to my attention. A foster mother has complained that one of our gels placed a sanitary

towel under her bed. What an awful, terrible thing, to dispose of a sanitary towel under the bed. What will the foster parents think of we Londoners if we behave in so irresponsible a manner?"

Her voice shook with emotion. I was very interested. I hadn't had my period, yet. I wasn't even sure what a period was. I knew that every month Mummy boiled bloody strips of cloth in a special pot, stirring them with a special wooden spoon until the strips gradually became pink, then white. Each time, she reminded me I'd torn her womb and that was why she bled so much. But I didn't know where the blood came from or where I would put the sanitary towels when I got my period. Miss Menzies rambled on about what a terrible crime this girl had committed, but she never did say where to put the bloody sanitary napkin. I supposed the offending girl hadn't known what to do with it either, and was too shy to ask.

After Miss Menzies finished, we strode out in twos, Rita taking extra large steps. I tried to copy her but nearly fell over. Miss Senior, the music teacher, banged out a march on the piano so hard I thought she was trying to break the keys. Mr. Bannister, my music teacher before the war, would never have played like that.

After Prayers, we marched upstairs to our classroom. The door was marked, "First Form." The room had probably once been a bedroom in the mansion. Now it was filled with twenty-five

wooden desks. I sat quietly in mine like all the other eleven-year-old girls dressed identically to me. A white porcelain ink well sat in its usual hole at the top of the desk, and a pen with a removable nib lay in a groove in front of it. The first class was English composition, one of my favorite classes. Our teacher was Miss Johnson, a tall, frizzy blonde-haired lady who dressed in long skirts and floating scarves and bangles. I was impressed with the way she could yawn with her mouth shut. Only a sharp intake of flesh in her throat, a slight down-turn of her mouth told me she had yawned.

After the first class we had to choose a second foreign language besides French, which was compulsory. The choices were either Latin or German. I had heard Latin was hard, so I slipped into the line for the German class. I hated the Germans, but I thought German would be easier than Latin. I was marching single file with the other German linguists-to-be when somebody took hold of my shirt collar and yanked me, staggering backwards, out of the line.

"You're in Latin," said a voice with an Irish brogue.

I twisted my head to see who it was. A slender woman of about forty, with fiery red hair parted down the middle, waved on each side and gathered into a small bun at the nape of her neck, had me imprisoned by my collar.

Without my knowledge Daddy had told the school that I was to take Latin. It was his only participation in my high school

education. Later I found out he wanted me to be a pharmacist, which explained why he chose Latin for me. He never discussed this with me. I had no idea why he wanted me to be a pharmacist. Miss Brady seemed to skewer me with her piercing blue eyes.

She had high cheek bones and a high-bridged nose, thin nostrils. She was wearing an exquisite mohair amethyst suit which looked straight out of Bond Street. Her feet were shod in what I thought were expensive shoes. Her wardrobe must have cost a fortune. But what else did teachers have to spend money on? High school teachers weren't allowed to marry. They all wore flat shoes and no makeup. Miss Brady was the only teacher to wear high heels and lipstick. If you made a mistake, she rapped you on the knuckles with the ruler, right up until you were eighteen, Rita Gillis told me.

Sure enough when I misdeclined, "hic, haec, hoc," her ruler came down on my knuckles in a smarting rap.

After we had thoroughly learned grammar, we translated Horace's poems and Tacitus's *Agricola*. We had to pass Latin with honors at eighteen to be eligible to "sit for" a B.A.

"Decline hic," Miss Brady said.

Hic, haec, hoc
Hunc, hanc, hoc."

And so on.

"Plural everybody," she snapped and we chorused:

Hi, hae, hae
Hos, has, hae
Horum, harum, horum

His, his, his,
His, his, his,

we all hissed. Miss Brady rapped a few knuckles and smiled.

There was a break at eleven. There was no playground so we streamed outside Archer House into the market square opposite. We went to a little alley close by where they sold hot cross buns. I bought one with the pocket money Mummy always sent with her twice-weekly letters.

"I bet they drop the raisins in these hot cross buns from the top of Ely Cathedral, there's so few of them," Beatrice said.

Beatrice had a narrow, wolf-like face. I didn't like her. She once borrowed my notes from class, scattered them all over the street and didn't even apologize.

"Raisin sighted," she yelled, then licked her one raisin while we watched. Strict rationing of sugar made us lick the thin sliver of sugar on the bun slowly, trying to make it last.

The market square was crammed with stalls all around the edge. Vegetables and fruits supplemented our rations of two ounces of meat, two ounces of butter and one egg a week. Clothes, petrol, coal, *everything* was rationed, so Ely bought or grew all the vegetables it could. Fish was not rationed, but women had to get there early before it ran out.

"Not fish again," we'd groan, after the third time in a week. We ate meat only once a week for Sunday dinner at twelve. Occasionally Mrs. Lupson cooked bacon crumbled with cabbage and fried them together to make "bubble and squeak." Though I loved

bacon I didn't especially like bubble and squeak.

The market was packed with people, which made me happy. It was a little more like London but still a far cry.

On the other side of the market square, I spied a good-looking boy of about fifteen, blond, dressed in the pale grey school uniform of the Ely Cathedral Boys' High School. He was looking intently at a stall that sold marbles. I sneaked all the way round to his side of the market, pulled his gray blazer and streaked away. I was sure he couldn't know who'd done it, but no sooner had I arrived at my place opposite him than he gave me a mischievous smile. He probably knew I was a Londoner and a Jew. The Cathedral Boys' School, directly attached to the cathedral, was very churchy and very snobby. He'd never speak to me.

Life at the Lupsons proceeded boringly. Elsie Lupson was a spoiled brat. She always looked surly but then so did her mother. I never did find out what her father worked at.

We seldom had bombing attacks in the country but one night the siren sounded with its long, anguished wail. This was no false alarm. I hurried into my one-piece wool siren suit, made of trousers, top and a hood all in one. I slid into it and zipped it up from crotch to neck. Mummy had it made for me by a local seamstress. It was cold. I pulled the pointed hood over my head, snatched up my gas mask, then rushed outside and dove down the two steps into our Anderson bomb shelter. It was only a few feet deep and had a corrugated iron roof.

We sat squashed on the narrow benches opposite each other and smelled the stink from the kerosine heater. Since there was no drain in the shelter, the ground inside was wet from rain. Our feet rested in mud. We sat in the mud and damp smelling of wet earth, glumly silent. After an hour the all-clear sounded. Luckily the enemy planes had flown over Ely without dropping any bombs. There was nothing important to bomb in Ely. I wished they'd bomb the Cathedral. The Jerries were headed for London, East London, the docks. I prayed they wouldn't bomb my parents or grandparents, especially not my Zada nor Aunty Regina.

"I like her siren suit," Elsie Lupson told her mother. "I want it."

"Hide it or she'll take it," Moira told me that night. We were undressing for bed in the tiny room at the top of the stairs. I hid the siren suit under the bed.

As we hung our school uniforms over the bed-rail for the morning Moira said, "By the way bacon is not kosher. I don't eat it."

"Oh if you don't then I won't," I said. I didn't know what `kosher' meant, but I liked Moira. She had principles. She always said what she thought and you knew where you stood with her. What she did, I did.

When we told Mrs. Lupson next morning that I wouldn't be eating bacon any more, her face grew radiant. Smiling for the first time she exclaimed, "Two extra bacon rations. We'll have

bubble and squeak tonight." I felt a slight pang of regret. I supposed Moira and I would have fish again.

One morning as I was leaving for school, I passed Elsie Lupson on the front porch. She sat in her bare feet, lazily combing her hair and examining the comb.

"Looking for nits?" I yelled at her in parting.

Elsie ran inside and got her father's gun. She pointed it at me. "Would you like a hole in your head, Jewgirl?" she shouted. I told Miss Brady I was afraid to go home that night.

"Och, ye're imagining' things," she said.

"I'll stay with you every minute," Moira reassured me.

The next day the billeting officer came round.

"I hear you've been rude to the Lupsons. You're to go to this address, and be more careful of your manners."

Although I hadn't liked the Lupsons, I felt bad at being thrown out after so little time. I liked Moira with her brusque but kindly way. I'd see her in school and in the town, but it wouldn't be the same as sleeping snuggled up to her at night and sharing new rituals I didn't understand but followed because I liked her so much.

I had also liked Mr. Lupson. Though he said nothing his eyes were kindly. He made me think of my father. I wondered what Daddy thought and what her was doing now. Why didn't he write? After writing once and swearing me to secrecy he never wrote

again. I couldn't understand why I wasn't allowed to write to my own father. I thought he had no guts if it was true that my mother forbade him to write to me, not to stand up to her. If he'd made up the story he still had no guts. Like my mother, I had no respect for my father, except for his liking beautiful things and museums. I secretly admired him being racy. I couldn't write to my father and I couldn't speak about this to my mother. Was it possible she was jealous of me? How could a mother be jealous of her daughter?

I hoped that in my next billet there would be a friendlier foster-mother and a friendly foster-father.

7

The Barnards

The Barnards seemed like an ordinary family: Mr. and Mrs. Barnard, their widowed daughter, Florence, whom they called Flo, and her twin eight-year-olds, Beryl and Roger. Flo's husband had died in a London air raid. She was the only foster-sister, who, besides Mrs. Pettit, spoke to me like a human being.

"My husband didn't die from the air raid. The silly bugger had a heart attack from fright," she said. "Our house was demolished. I came to with half a bowl stuck in my head."

Mr. and Mrs. Barnard were in their mid-fifties, Flo seemed to be about thirty-two. It was hard for me to judge adults' ages.

Mr. Barnard was tall, slim and still handsome, with brown hair just turning gray, a lock of it always falling into his blue eyes. I bet myself he'd been a real ladies' man in his youth. His daredevil eyes and quiet voice made him slightly sinister. He was always dressed in a suit and waistcoat, white shirt and tie, and a gold watch on a chain draped elegantly across his flat waistcoat. Every morning he'd take out his watch, press the spring on its cover, which would fly open, and say, "Oh, is it eleven o'clock? Time to go." He meant to the pub.

Mrs. Barnard's lips would compress as she ducked her head and lowered her eyes down over her darning or over the carrots she was scraping in the sink. In a leisurely way, Mr. Barnard

would lift his hat from the peg in the hall, stick it on his head at a rakish angle, swing his walking stick and leave.

"I fought in the Great War," he told me once. "I got poison gas from the Germans. Doctors took out my eyeballs, cleaned them then put them back."

I stared at his eyeballs. There they were, right back in his head in the right place. I believed everything he said.

Mrs. Barnard was also tall and angular, rather like Aunt Ellen of Hythe. Mummy had sent me to stay at her seaside house in Hythe for the last two summers and at Christmas time. But whereas Aunt Ellen's angularity was softened by her eyes, welling over with happiness because of her Tom, Mrs. Barnard's eyes were grim. She never smiled. Her head and eyes were always downcast, her mouth always pressed into a thin, tight line. She wore drab gray or brown cotton dresses. She never spoke unless spoken to or to call us to meals. She looked like a Christian martyr. I'd seen a picture of one in the orphanage church, arrows stuck all over her, eyes turned up to heaven in agony. Mrs. Barnard's eyes were always turned down but still, I thought, in a silent pain.

She did sometimes talk to her daughter, Florence, or to her grandchildren but still, very little. She barely spoke to me at all.

Flo, on the other hand, was jolly and bouncy. She was tall and generously endowed, saved from fat by a small waist. She

wore her hair in a straight bob parted in the middle. She had a mischievous look in her eye, a little like her father, which her soldier boyfriend Bill brought out in her, teasing and tickling her as he did.

Bill was stocky. He always wore his thick khaki uniform, a battle jacket, khaki trousers and rakish cap shaped like an upside-down boat. He looked about thirty-five. He had a broad impudent face, bold eyes, a coarse laugh, and thick sandy hair growing low over his forehead. He made Flo happy, chasing her round the settee in the front room. When he caught and tickled her, she giggled helplessly on the sofa and I couldn't decide if they were ridiculous or joyful. Grownups tickling each other on sofas seemed strange.

The Barnards lived in an old, low, rambling country house. There were no decorations in the house--no pictures, no mirrors. The sofa in the living room was a drab, Protestant beige. Of course, with the war no one could buy new furniture, but I was sure the Barnards wouldn't even if they could. Though retired, Mr. Barnard acted as if he was well-off, and sauntered in and out of the house as if it were a hotel. Mrs. Barnard spent most of her life, it seemed, slaving over the kitchen sink scraping carrots.

Just outside the back door where we all came in stood a huge wooden barrel brimming over with rainwater. Little clear droplets trickled over its round, brown sides, past the metal

bands which bound it, and dripped to the ground. It left small shining puddles in the earthen yard.

"This is great water for washing your hair," Flo said, as she scooped out a bucketful. "We'll also have water in case the Jerries cut off our supply. They might invade us, you know."

"That would be the worst thing that could ever happen," I said.

"Oh, I don't know," Flo said carelessly. Perhaps because she was Christian, she didn't know or care that all Jews would be killed. True she had lost a husband in a random bomb, but her family wouldn't be deliberately hunted down and murdered.

As in most country homes, the privies were outside. The back of the house was shaded by plain trees except for a fragrant lilac that was just blooming. Every day coming home from school, I'd bury my face in the lilac flowers and breathe in their scent. It was the only perfume we had.

We ate in the dining room, which faced the backyard and the water barrel. On Sunday we had the only meat meal of the week. Mrs. Barnard usually served a small, twelve-ounce roast with roast potatoes, Yorkshire pudding and peas, or cabbage. Mr. Barnard carved the meat very carefully, giving us each a small slice. The elder Barnards went to church on Sundays, though Mr. Barnard would stop at the pub on his way home for a quick one, while Mrs. Barnard went on to check the roast and Yorkshire pudding. Perhaps Flo helped with the cooking, but I didn't see

her work at all. Maybe that was one reason Mrs. Barnard was so surly. Perhaps she did all the work for six people.

I looked forward to Sunday evening when we had high tea in the late afternoon. At this meal we had potted meat, potted shrimp, scallions, radishes, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, cheese, pickled beets, piccalilli, thick slabs of white bread and margarine, home made jams and jellies and strong, hot tea. We could eat as much of anything as we wanted, which was a great luxury. We took turns eating the stalk of raw cabbage. To our wartime palates, these crunchy vegetables were rare treats. We also drank the water in which the vegetables had been cooked. If we got really hungry, we might eat a mashed potato sandwich. We ate a lot of starches, bread and potatoes, which made some girls fat, though we walked most of that off. We had no fruit.

Some people, Miss Menzies for instance, developed vitamin deficiencies. Mummy sent Miss Menzies butter for some kind of vitamin deficiency which made her nails shrivel. Of course Miss Menzies didn't know it was black market butter or she'd have been horrified.

Saturdays, after I had finished my three hours' load of homework, French, Latin, English, math, art and so on, I went to the small local, privately-run library. It was in a house and the entire downstairs level was filled with bookshelves and books. I took out several murder mysteries. Sundays, I sat alone in the front room on the sofa before a fireless grate and read a book in

a day. This was the only foster home I stayed in where we were allowed to use the front room, perhaps because this one had no piano and no aspidistra.

I imagined Flo's room with a frilly pink bedspread and frilly pink curtains. She was a big woman but with Bill, you'd think she was a little girl as he chased her round the sofa. She let herself be caught and pinned down on her back. While he leaned over her and tickled her under the arms, she let out girlish cries and giggles. I was sure he pinched her bottom when we weren't looking and that she would give little cries of pretend outrage.

Bill hung around the house all the time and often ate with us in spite of Mrs. Barnard's dour face. He couldn't keep his hands off Florence. She seemed to like it and why not? I wondered if Bill ever went upstairs to her bedroom, but I never saw him lift the latch of her door over the stairs. I shouldn't have been surprised if her father had allowed it. I was sure Mrs. Barnard would have been outraged, if she felt anything at all, but her husband would have overruled her. Perhaps Bill did go to Florence's room at night and perhaps this was another reason for Mrs. Barnard's sullen face.

"They only live once," I imagined Mr. Barnard saying.

I always longed to explore forbidden staircases but was afraid of being caught as I had been at the Pettit's. I had no

excuse for going up the adults' staircase, but I was obsessed with what lay above there.

One day when everything was dead quiet in the house, I crept up those stairs. At the top, as I had imagined, was a pink bedroom with a white and pink fluffy bedspread on the bed. Only this time it wasn't on the bed, it was on the floor. On the bed, totally naked, lay entwined, Bill and Florence. Bill was on top of Florence jiggling up and down on her, breathing hard as Florence shrieked girlishly. I wondered if he was hurting her. Once, in the middle of the night, I'd seen Daddy on top of Mummy. I thought he was strangling her and I screamed. They moved me out of their bedroom into the living room, where I had to sleep on a hard horse hair sofa. I didn't want to be found out at the Barnards and moved to another billet, so I crept down the stairs and quietly closed the stair door. Heart beating, I ran up to my bedroom.

Our children's wing must have been one huge attic room, which had been divided into two rooms. I had to pass through the twins' bedroom to get to mine, and we shared a window. There was a large space between the window and our dividing wall, so I could hear anything they said. They constantly stuck their heads around the opening between the wall and the window to watch me.

The twins teased me unmercifully. "Har, har, look at her with white stuff all over her face," they laughed. The ignorant

asses, I thought.

At eleven I was already obsessed with film stars like Joan Fontaine, whom I'd seen in *Rebecca*, with Laurence Olivier. I played hooky from school to see it. I sighed over both of them. He was so handsome and so passionate. I imagined myself in his arms and wearing a long, glamorous white ballroom gown like Joan Fontaine or Hedy Lamarr wore. If only I could be as beautiful as those two exquisite women. If only I could have a romance with someone as wonderful as Laurence Olivier. If only a handsome man loved me, I would be so happy. So I smoothed Pond's face cream on my skin every night to become as beautiful as Joan Fontaine and find love, as she had.

I longed to be beautiful. I peered at my face every day in the small mirror I'd bought in Woolworth's. Was I pretty? No. But I had an intriguing face, somewhat like the film star in *Pygmalian*, Wendy Hiller. My most unusual feature was my green-gold eyes upturned at the ends, like my Russian-born grandmother (hers were like a Tartar's), and a small, retroussé nose. My hair was bobbed short and parted in the middle. I was still small, only about an inch over five feet, and slim. My body was developing curves and I now had breasts.

Once I tried a white face pack I'd bought in Woolworth's. Roger and Beryl peeked round the gap.

"Look at her with the white face again," they chortled. "Don't she look funny?" I hastily scrubbed the face mask off.

One day I found a round, red spot, as large as a penny, vivid against my white knickers. Mrs. Barnard was hunched over the sink, as usual, scraping carrots.

"I don't know where this blood comes from, I'm not cut and nothing hurts me," I said to her.

Mrs. Barnard handed me a piece of cotton wadding and mumbled in a monotone, "Put this in your knickers until the blood stops,"

That was my introduction to menstruation. True I had seen Mummy boiling bloody towels every month. And true I had heard Miss Menzies expound about the terrible girl who had put her bloody napkin under the bed. But I didn't connect either of these with my own personal spot of blood. I still didn't know where one *did* put the bloody napkin. There was no one I dared ask.

I didn't bleed after the first day. I took the nearly clean napkin, wrapped it in newspaper and put it in the dustbin. I then washed the blood out of my knickers. I felt quite grown up.

But where did I get sanitary napkins for the next time? At school I asked Moira in a whisper, and she pointed me to Woolworth's, our mecca. That afternoon I slunk along the bare, wooden floors of the shop and looked around furtively. If someone should see me, especially a boy, I'd be mortified. I whispered to the girl behind the counter, "Sanitary towels." She handed them over, I paid, quickly stuffed the towels in my school satchel, and ran out like a thief. I hid them in my drawer under

some blouses. I didn't want the twins to know about it. They'd tease me to death, asking a million questions, making fun of me.

One day, after several months, Bill disappeared. Flo went around silent, her eyes red-rimmed. I wondered what had happened. Had Bill left her or been shipped out? Had he gone to the front and been killed in battle? Or did he have a wife and had only "led her up the garden path?" I didn't dare ask, though Florence looked me full in the face, almost as if she was bursting to talk. I was too young to understand what she wanted. If only I had said, "What happened to Bill?" she would probably have been glad to talk to me. I was afraid to ask in case she said, "Nosy parker, MYOB," mind your own business.

I decided that Flo must have found out that Bill was married. I didn't know whether he was or wasn't but I didn't trust him, all smiles. He just seemed the kind. She must have told him to leave. That didn't mean she didn't miss him. I knew she cried a lot. I was sorry for her but didn't know what to do or say. After two weeks, she no longer had reddened eyes but she lost her excited smile and girlish giggle. I was sorry to see her so sad. I hoped no man would disappoint me that way. I didn't expect it. To me love was still bright, romantic, and, when it came, would last forever.

8

Joseph Singer

One day, Moira, who was still billeted at the Lupsons, called for me at the Barnards. When I opened the door I was happy to see her intense dark eyes and curly black hair. We went for a walk.

"Tomorrow will be Yom Kippur. If you like I can call for you and take you to *shul*. They have services in the Jewish Boys' Free School."

"Okay," I said, "I'll come." I loved the idea of Moira calling for me again, though I didn't know what Yom Kippur was. I'd never heard of it.

I'd never been in a synagogue. My grandparents, though both observant Jews, never took me to a synagogue nor taught me anything at all about Judaism. When I was five I'd gone to Hebrew school for two weeks. We sang Hebrew songs, one, two three, arms in the air, and I loved it. But either Mummy couldn't be bothered to take me or had sent me to the orphanage soon after I began. That cut short my Jewish education. My parents practiced nothing, except Mother lit candles on Friday evening before working in the shop.

The next day Moira and I walked a long way to the outskirts of Ely. We arrived at a large country house and passed through a white garden gate. A pretty girl of about fifteen, with long, dark wavy hair, pale skin and dark eyes, and wearing a vividly

flowered dress, sat high in the fork of the tree. Below her stood three young men about her age. They looked up at her like bears who'd found a pot of honey but didn't know how to get to it. She smiled down at them mischievously.

With a foreign accent she laughed, "If anyone wants me, come up and get me."

I gasped. How daring she was. Would I ever be that sophisticated when I was fifteen? How I admired her. The boys, looking foolish, didn't know what to do but stare up at her.

Moira, ignoring all, entered the large house. I followed. The spacious front room, painted clean white, was cleared of all furniture. Light poured in from the enormously wide bay window overlooking the garden. There were no chairs for the girls, so we sat on the floor against a wall.

About a hundred young men and boys were praying--at least I guessed that was what they were doing. I'd never seen Jews pray. Some swayed from side to side, some from front to back. Some stood still, faces buried in prayer books, some turned their faces with a look of rapture toward heaven. Some wore white, black-striped shawls edged with fringes, which hung over their shoulders and gracefully down their backs. I thought they looked like zebras, horses of a different stripe, and loved the fringes on their shawls which fluttered with each movement. All of them wore a small round cap on their heads. There was a babble of young manly voices.

While Moira was reading the prayers in Hebrew with heartfelt devotion, I read the English translation next to the Hebrew. I had only had a few sessions in Hebrew school before the war and could barely read it. I was also looking at the boys. One stood out. He was taller than all the other boys, dark, slender, and, when he sometimes opened them, I could see his large, dark eyes. His thick hair was dark and curly. He was praying hard, his eyes closed, his lips moving, his body swaying. I'd never seen such manly passion before. It entranced me.

"Who's that?" I whispered to Moira.

"Joseph Singer," she said. "Shush."

Suddenly all the boys and men fell down on their knees and elbows and bowed their heads to the floor.

"What are they looking for?" I asked Moira, as we both fell down.

She looked at me with pity as we knelt, heads together on the floor.

"We're bowing to God. Only one time in the year, on Yom Kippur, on our hands and knees, we ask forgiveness for our sins," she hissed. I felt stupid and ignorant.

During a break in the praying, I asked Moira, "What is this place?"

"It's a boys' refugee hostel. They all escaped from Hitler. They're alone here because their parents couldn't get out. Well, some could get out, but most countries wouldn't let them in.

Most of these boys don't know if their parents are dead or alive."

I looked at Joseph Singer with compassion. Alone, without parents. Poor boy. If only I could comfort him. He was so handsome. Immersed in prayer, he didn't notice us once.

We stayed a long time fasting and praying in the boys' hostel. Well, Moira prayed while I watched, so many boys, all praying and fasting. Because of Moira I had given up bacon at the Lupsons, and now I fasted all day long with her. It was the first time I had fasted, but I found it perfectly easy. I don't know why I did it, perhaps because I liked Moira.

Moira was sincere and believed in God. She had ideals. I'd never known anyone with ideals or beliefs in God. I began to feel warm and close to Moira, at one with all those boys praying in Hebrew. I didn't know what they were saying, but being with Moira and with such devoted Jews gave me a feeling of comfort. I wanted to be one of them.

On our way back, Rosie, who had also been at the boys' hostel for Yom Kippur, walked with us.

"I don't care, I'm hungry. I'm going to get some chips," she said defiantly and stopped in a chip shop.

The chip shop was new, a copy of London chip shops, but the chips in the window were skinny, not nice and fat like the London chips. Rosie came out with a cornet of skinny chips, her eyes shooting in all different directions rather than look at us. I

felt virtuous and superior for having fasted all day like Moira.

When I got back to the Barnards that evening, I thought long and hard about Joseph Singer. He reminded me of a Joseph Singer in kindergarten, a scamp who, during a school play in which I played the queen, pulled the chair from under me before I sat down. But it couldn't be the same boy grown up, because this one was a refugee. I loved this new Joseph Singer on sight. He was so tall, dark and handsome. His dark eyes flashed, and he looked so dramatic, so romantic.

That night I sat on my bed in the little attic room, the slanted ceiling almost touching my head, with a pad on my knees. A candle flickered on the table as I dipped my pen in the ink bottle and wrote in my best handwriting:

"Dear Joseph,

You don't know me, but I think you are the most handsome boy I've ever seen. I am an evacuee, and live on Chandler Street.

Your admirer."

I didn't sign my name.

I put this note in an envelope and licked it shut. In the soft candlelight I wrote his name on the outside. I wasn't going to post it. That would take too long. I had to tell him how I felt, *now*. It was about ten o'clock and the Barnard house was still. Everyone was asleep. I tiptoed out of the house, quietly closed the unlocked door and breathed in the fresh night air.

Everywhere was silent and dark, save for the searchlights scouring the starry skies for enemy planes. The streets were deserted.

I sped through the night to the boys' hostel. I had intended to drop my letter through the letterbox, but the front door was wide open. Beyond the door it was pitch dark. Faintly lit by the searchlights, a mat lay on the floor just inside the door. I was afraid to go inside. Suppose I were caught there? The longer I stayed, the more danger that I might be seen by someone. All was silent except for my heart, beating as I stood on that mat, wondering what to do with the letter.

I thought I heard footsteps. I dropped my letter on the doormat and ran all the way home. I didn't see a soul on the way.

When I got back to the Barnards, the house was as still and quiet as I had left it. I took off my shoes and crept stealthily through Beryl and Roger's room into my own, closing the door with agonizing slowness so as not to make a sound. I undressed silently and slid into bed. That night I had a wonderful dream about Joseph Singer holding me in his arms and saying, "I love you, you're the only girl for me."

Two days later Miss Menzies called me into her office.

"Why did you write Joseph Singer a letter?"

It was a stupid question. Obviously because I liked him.

I stood silent and proud of my love. I imagined I was the beautiful heroine in a movie about to be tortured by an old spinster who had never known love. How did she find out?

"You will be sent to Coventry." I understood. Queen Elizabeth the First was punished by being sent to Coventry, a place far from the court where she could speak to no one. Miss Menzies continued, "You are not allowed to speak to any girl nor is any girl in the school allowed to speak to you for two weeks. You are also banned from assembly during this time. You may leave."

I left, chin held high, my spirit unbroken.

Joseph Singer had probably received my letter by now and knew of my love, unless someone had found it first and given it to his headmistress or mine. Perhaps he never knew of my letter.

It had been stupid of me to say I was an evacuee and which street I lived on. There was only one other evacuee on my street, Jocelyn Thielkuhl. She was a *shiksa* and a swot. She did nothing but study. She would never have gone to the Jewish boys' refugee hostel. It was impossible to imagine her interested in boys. She wore enormous square tortoiseshell goggles, the lenses so thick you could hardly see her eyes, and was interested only in science. She never wasted words on ordinary mortals like me. There was no way the author of the love letter could be Jocelyn Thielkuhl. It had to be me.

I bore my exclusion stoically, the beautiful heroine

suffering for her love. During breaks I wandered alone around our "playground," the empty market square, looking at the pictures outside the only cinema, trying not to look alone, or trying to look as if I didn't *care* if I was alone. The girls didn't speak to me as Miss Menzies had ordered, though they hovered close and stared at me with a kind of respect. They all seemed to know what I'd done. Miss Menzies must have told them during morning assembly while I was outside, banned from it. I began to realize I was a sort of a heroine to them, brave, plucky, and romantic. I was the adventuress I'd always wanted to be. I was quite sure Miss Menzies must have told the Barnards about it, but they never mentioned anything. Maybe this adventure was, however, what prompted Mr. Barnard's strange behavior toward me later.

In addition to Miss Menzies' punishment, I was sent to the headmistress of The Jewish Boys' Free School. I didn't know why their headmistress wanted to see me.

The head mistress, a short, stout Jewish lady who breathed heavily was known to us kids as Old Sally Wetlegs.

Old Sally Wetlegs gave me a long harangue ending with, "You do see my point, don't you?" It was all I could do not to burst out laughing. I thought I must have done something pretty daring, since they were all making so much fuss about it. I'd been called in not by one, but by *two* headmistresses. I felt very important and quite proud. I was as daring as that girl in

the tree who had laughed at the boys below and said, "Anyone who wants me come and get me." I felt like a grown-up woman who knew how to love and how to express her love, the way Joan Fontaine had expressed it in *Rebecca*. This was so romantic.

The two weeks of Coventry passed easily. Though no one spoke to me at break time, the girls came to look at me in the town square. I could see they admired me. When it was over I had gained, without the subject ever being mentioned, several new friends besides Moira.

Death in the Family

A heavy blanket of white snow covered the town. The lakes and streams of Ely, named after the eels which swam there, had frozen over. Ely Cathedral loomed large, gray and gloomy over the snow. One icy day a letter arrived.

256 Vallance Road
Bethnal Green
London, E.2. 1. 3. 1941

Dear Gilda,
It's bitterly cold, snowing almost every day. The war news is very depressing. Thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen are being killed, wounded or missing in action. We're being bombed to smithereens every single night. The windows and roof have fallen in from the bombing but thank God no direct hit. In any case I refuse to go to a shelter. If I'm going to die I'll die in my own bed.

I have some news to tell you.

Love, Mum.

She enclosed a pound note. She always sent money. Her writing had become worse, spiky--it reminded me of swastikas. What was the news? Why hadn't she put it in the letter? I wrote, asking, but received no answer.

A week later, Mummy suddenly came to visit. It was the first time she visited me in the two and a half years since I'd been evacuated. She wore a brown wool coat with little fur minks around her neck, their mouths clipped to their tails in what I thought was a silly fashion. What self-respecting mink would bite its own tail? Their beady glass eyes seemed to be staring

at me inquisitively. Zada, a furrier, had given them to her. A brown slouch hat was pulled down low over her face. Her face was white under the rouge. She bit her full lips.

Lacking privacy at the Barnards we left the house. There was nowhere to go on a Sunday, though. Even the one tea shop was closed. Instead we walked alongside Ely Cathedral. On the snow-covered banks of the River Ouze, we found a bench encased in ice but it was too cold to sit. We stood and stamped our feet to keep warm. Nearby, red-cheeked boys from Ely Cathedral Boys' High School, elegant in their pale gray uniforms and long scarves, were having a snowball fight. I spotted the one whose blazer I'd tweaked at the market my first day in Ely.

Mummy's breath streamed out white like the steam from Daddy's hot towel machine. Her eyes were swimming in tears.

"I came to tell you your Uncle Adrian is dead. He was blown up in an explosion in his chemical laboratory."

At that instant a frozen ice-packed snowball slammed hard and stinging into the back of my bare neck, jolting me to my knees in the cold snow. I looked to see who had thrown it. A boy had his arm still raised and was laughing at me. It was the boy from the market. I burst into tears, whether from the news of Uncle Adrian's death or the pain of the cold snowball hitting my skin, disappointment that a boy I liked had hit me, I didn't know.

I rose slowly to my feet. Mummy paced back and forth beside

the iced-over benches. "He was working on a secret chemical formula. It could have been sabotage, we don't really know," she said. "Aunty Regina is pregnant, she's expecting Adrian's child. She wants to marry Raphael."

"Well, now she can," I said, tears running down my cheeks. The tears turned to ice.

I felt lonelier as Mummy ignored my tears. If only she had held me in her arms to comfort me. Had she come to Ely just to tell me about Uncle Adrian's death? I was sorry he had been killed but I hardly knew him. She could just as well have written it in her last letter. I thought she'd come just to see me, *finally*, but I was wrong. She was here to share the troubles of the family that had chosen to ignore me.

If only we could go to a cozy restaurant and have a cup of tea. Then everything would be all right.

Mummy smiled bitterly. "With the government compensation Regina gets from Adrian's death, she'll have her *nadn*. Raphael's family can't object to the marriage anymore. Isn't it ironic? Regina always gets what she wants. Only problem is her being pregnant."

"Why is that a problem?" I asked.

"Well of course she doesn't want to go into a new marriage pregnant. It's not very romantic," Mother said, as if to an idiot. "Aunty Regina asked me to help her get an abortion. Do you know what an abortion is?"

"No," I said.

"It gets rid of the baby so it's never born."

"How?" I asked. Mother ignored my question.

"Somehow Booba heard about it. She came round and knocked on the door. I was surprised to see her, she doesn't visit me much."

I could have reminded Mummy that it had been two years since she'd visited me. I was silent.

"I opened the door, very happy to see her, gave her a big smile, and what do you think she does?"

"What?"

"She smacks me hard across the face, *me*, her eldest daughter." Mother began to sob. "And she says to me, `How dare you try to murder my grandchild? I don't ever want to see you again,' and she storms off. She's forbidden everyone in the family to talk to me. And to you."

"To me, what did *I* do?" I said, fresh tears falling.

Tears fell down Mummy's cheeks as well, making a white streak down the middle of her rouge.

"It was Regina's idea and I get all the blame. I always get the blame in my family. Regina can do no wrong and I can do no right."

I felt depressed. I felt unhappy because Mummy had so often told me that I looked like Aunt Regina. Mummy hated Aunt Regina but couldn't openly fight her because Booba would scream at

Mummy. So I thought that sometimes Mummy blamed me when she wanted to blame Aunt Regina. But Mummy was speaking to me as if I were a grownup. She seemed to want *my* sympathy when I needed *hers*. Now that she had no mother or family, and only a deaf husband, I was the last one she had left to talk to. But I needed a mother to talk to.

"I have to catch the train back," Mummy suddenly said.

She deserted me in the park, stiff with cold near the iced-over river. The boys had gone. I watched her figure grow smaller and smaller. I wanted to run after her and say, "Take me back with you," as I had wanted when she visited me at the orphanage. I wanted to hug her and her furs. I wanted her to hug me back. I wanted to be back in our cozy kitchen and for us to cry together over Uncle Adrian's death and for being unfairly cut off from my Zada, aunts and uncles. I watched as my mother's figure disappeared.

I walked back to the Barnards' through the snowy deserted streets, the gigantic Cathedral looming like a black cloud through all the spaces between buildings. Mummy had stayed an hour and then left, back to the bustle, to the warm people of London and the East End. I thought of tall, handsome Uncle Adrian with his curly black hair, his Douglas Fairbanks mustache and devilish smile, his sparkling, clever dark eyes. I couldn't imagine him dead.

As I walked back to the Barnards' feeling deeply sad and lonely and longing for someone to love, I remembered Jocelyn Thielkul's foster mother had kittens to give away. If only I could have a kitten like Binkie, my kitten in London, a creature to cuddle, a creature who would love me.

"Jocelyn Thielkul's foster mother's cat has had kittens," I said to Mrs. Barnard when I returned. "There's an adorable little black one. May I have it?"

To my surprise she nodded her head as she morosely scraped carrots over the sink.

I ran immediately over to Jocelyn's house.

Jocelyn, with her skinny body, giant head of hair and thick glasses, opened the door. Even though it was Sunday, she was wearing her school uniform.

"Yes?" she said, looking down her nose. She could say the word as if it was an insult.

I told her I'd come for the kitten.

"Hang on a mo'" she said and left me standing at the door. She returned immediately with a tiny ball of black fur with a single white spot over her eyes. The four week old kitten mewled helplessly as Jocelyn shoved it at me.

"Oh, she's a darling," I said, and cradled her, so soft and weak, to my breast. She soon snuggled against me, purring. Jocelyn snorted and shut the door in my face.

I called her Binkie like my London kitten. She was full of

deviltry, sticking her nose into everything. She raced over the back of the settee, pounced on invisible mice, skittered along the polished floors then skidded to a sudden stop. I never tired of watching her pointy tail high in the air or her tiny pink tongue lapping milk, in and out, in and out. That little pink tongue licked my face every morning. Binkie was the happiest creature I'd ever seen, full of the joy of living. Just watching her I felt some pleasure seeping back into my veins, which seemed to have dried up. She slept against my face at night, her tiny body warm against mine. I could feel her little heart beating if I put my fingers gently to it. She was so tiny, so fragile. She trusted me, her protector. In the nearly three long years I had been evacuated, she was the first living creature that belonged just to me, that loved me and I loved in return.

About two weeks later I came home from school and immediately ran into the yard to look for Binkie. I couldn't see her anywhere. No flash of black fur, no puff dashing about.

"Have you seen Binkie?" I asked Mrs. Barnard, grim-faced as always, at the sink, peeling potatoes.

"Mr. Barnard drowned her," she said without looking up from her potatoes.

"No, he couldn't, he wouldn't," I screamed, struck with horror.

"He did."

"Why, why, why?" Tears streamed from my eyes.

She refused to answer. Head lowered, she went on scraping potatoes. I was crazy with anguish. I didn't know what to do.

I raced upstairs to my room. I got into my narrow bed and lay trembling. I thought of tall Mr. Barnard sweeping my tiny Binkie up in one hand and callously dropping her into the full barrel of rain water. I saw Binkie terrified as she hit the water with all four little legs outstretched, clawing desperately with her tiny paws to find something solid to hold on to. I heard her anguished mewling for help and saw her struggling for breath, her pink tongue sticking out for air, her white little teeth wide open with fear, her fur sopping wet and dragging her down, gasping in that hateful barrel of soft water. Then finally, with none to save her, not even me, her lungs filled with water, I imagined her sinking to the bottom of that horrible deep barrel, her breath gone, her heart stopped, my innocent little kitten who had been so joyously full of life, dying. Was she still down there, lying limp in that water so soft and good for your hair?

Why had he drowned her? Had she torn the settee? Drunk too much of the milk ration? She could have had mine. If they didn't want her any more, why hadn't they let me try to find another home for her? They'd given me a little joy, then abruptly snatched it away from me. Even Mrs. Barnard had been brutal in the way she told me of the kitten's death. She hadn't needed to be that hurtful. She knew how I loved Binkie. Perhaps she

wanted to hurt me. The kitten was so full of love and life, and dour Mrs. Barnard couldn't stand watching the kitten's or my happiness.

I heard the iron latch on my bedroom door lift with a click. I didn't look to see who was there. I didn't care. A tall figure came into my room and stopped close to my bed. His head seemed to touch the low ceiling. He filled the small room.

"I expect you're upset about your kitten," Mr. Barnard said, easily, as if he were saying, "It's tea time."

I lay dumb, still as a corpse. I looked at him full in the eye, standing there towering six foot four over me. I hated him as much as I hated Ely Cathedral, as much as I hated Ely.

Mr. Barnard looked slowly over the length of my body lying under the blanket. He was wearing his neat gray suit with the waistcoat and the gold watch and chain. He looked so respectable. Was he going to apologize for murdering my kitten? It wouldn't help. She was dead.

"Stand up," he said, very softly.

I obeyed.

He pulled me in front of him. He was six foot four and I was five foot one. He stared down at me and began trembling violently all over. I couldn't imagine what was wrong with him. Did he have a cold or a temperature? He sat on the chair and pulled me close to him, standing me between his knees. Why was he doing that, I wondered. Did he feel guilty? Was he going to hug

me for the loss of Binkie?

He put a shaking hand up my skirt and stroked the inside of my bare thigh. His hand wandered higher. He was shaking and panting. I noticed a bulge in the front of his trousers. He began unbuttoning them, his fingers still trembling. I was horrified and furious.

"I hate you," I screamed.

I shoved him back, wrenched myself away from his hand, flew down the stairs, out of the house and into the yard. The twins were playing hopscotch, jumping in and out of the chalk squares. I dashed between them, nearly knocking one of them over.

"What's wrong?" Beryl said curiously.

"That hateful old man your grandfather drowned my kitten and then put his hand up my skirt," I screamed. "I hate him, I hate all of you," and I ran away.

I stayed out until they'd all gone to bed. I walked round the dead town, round and round the shops, weeping and cursing the Barnards under my breath. I hated Ely and being evacuated. I hated Uncle Adrian for dying. First him then my kitten. I hated Mummy for sending me away. I hated Daddy for not stopping her. I hated Booba for cutting Mummy and me out of the family. I hated all of them for not writing to me, for not bringing me home to live with them. I hated the war. I hated the Nazis.

I felt so lonely I could die.

The next day the billeting officer came for me.

10

Mrs. Gotobed

My new foster mother stared at me with large, fine gray eyes. "Been in trouble in your last billet, have you?"

I opened my mouth to protest that it hadn't been my fault, but she snapped, "Well there'll be no larking about here.

Mrs. Gotobed, about forty-five, was a small, slightly plump woman with a neat waist. With her slightly receding chin, her large lower lip, and her supercilious eyes, she looked like Alfred Hitchcock's sister.

"Put your things in your room, top of the stairs, wash your hands and come down to supper."

I sighed and trundled upstairs, carrying the little cardboard box which kept shrinking each time I moved. My new bedroom was, like the last, small and plain, with one window behind the bed. At least I had privacy. I could slather on as much Pond's cold cream or face-pack as I liked and no obnoxious Barnard grandchildren would poke their heads into my room and laugh at me.

The bed, the sheets and pillows and chenille bedspread were plain white. In the corner sat the usual china jug of cold water in a china basin on a washstand, a face cloth and towel on a rack.

There was no table or chair in my bedroom. I'd do my homework on the kitchen or dining room table. I bounced up and

down on the bed and punched the pillow. The bed and pillow, at least, were comfortable. I washed in the basin and ran downstairs.

"Don't run like an animal," Mrs. Gotobed commanded. Even her name was a command, *Go to bed*. I felt insulted but kept my mouth shut. I was tired of moving from one foster home to another. Perhaps she'd mellow in time.

Before sitting down for supper, I was drawn to the bookcase, which stood next to the fireplace. It was a glassed-in bookcase with three shelves of books bound in leather, their titles marked in faded gold lettering. I bent to look at the authors' names. They were all by Anthony Trollope.

"May I read one of these books sometime?" I asked, politely.

"We-e-ll all right, but be careful with them. They were my husband's books. Come and eat." She sounded a degree less frosty.

Mrs. Gotobed presided like Queen Mab at the head of the table, which was covered by a white tablecloth. My previous foster-mothers had spread a white tablecloth only on Sundays. I took my place at the table where two other boarders were sitting.

"I'm Helen," said a young lady of about twenty-five. She was tall and slender with a mop of dark wavy hair, which fell on both sides of her square face, and enormous tortoiseshell glasses.

"I'm from London, sent to Ely by the government. How I miss

London," she sighed.

"Me, too," I said.

"I'm Brian," said the young man at the table, "I'm also from London." He was about twenty-eight, short and slim with a brush mustache and sandy hair. "Shipped here by the government on war-work."

I wanted to say I was shipped here, too, but London evacuees were supposed to be polite and a credit to their school. These country foster parents had graciously taken us into their homes for very small recompense, we were told, and we were mostly treated as if we were a damned nuisance.

I smiled gratefully at Helen and Brian for speaking to me as if I was a human.

Mrs. Gotobed gave us each a sharp look. "You Londoners don't know when you're well off. Ely's a fine cathedral town. My dear, departed husband hated London."

Bollocks to him, I thought. I loved London.

Helen and Brian didn't say what work they did and I knew better than to ask. If they weren't in the armed forces at their age, they were either 4F or doing secret work like Uncle Adrian.

We ate a supper of boiled fish, boiled potatoes and brussels sprouts, with a passable apple pie and custard for dessert. How I wished for a plate of Mummy's chicken soup with fat *lokshen*--noodles--roast chicken, roast potatoes and stuffed chicken neck; even Mummy's fried fish and chips were tastier than this *goyishe*

bland cooking. Of course everything was rationed. At least we weren't hungry.

I did my homework on the cleared dining room table. Almost every night we were given three to four preparations for homework. My subjects were Latin, French, English, trigonometry, algebra, art, history, geography, physics, and biology, as well as music, gym, sports and dancing. We had English, French, Latin, Math and sports every day, the other subjects two or three times a week. I was doing poorly in math but dared not ask my teacher questions. She was a Jewish spinster with braids around her head and one leg shorter than the other who radiated aloofness. There was no one to help. You sank or swam. I was sinking in math and into depression.

Helen, Brian and I all came home for lunch. Right after we ate, usually in silence, Helen went into the front room with the aspidistra and played Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto and Beethoven's Symphony Number 5 with the Morse Code "V" for Victory *da da da daaaa* theme. When she played the victory symphony, it always roused in me fears of invasion and hopes for victory.

After lunch, I returned to school, changed into house shoes and went straight to "the alcove," on the second floor of Archer House. I sat on the wooden window seat, head down on my raised knees, and listened to Muriel Milgrom practice Brahms, Beethoven, and Bach.

Muriel was about sixteen, with a sardonic face and dark red hair parted down the middle. Her pale, almost translucent, white hands flashed up and down the yellowed keyboard like those, I imagined, of Dame Myra Hess. I wondered what my own piano teacher, Mr. Bannister, a former silent movie pianist, was doing in the war. Would he be 4F because he had only one tooth? Because he was so skinny? Maybe he played for the troops.

Muriel and I never spoke but we exchanged pleased glances. She played, I listened. Today she played Bach. I enjoyed hearing the repeated themes. When the bell rang we each went to our separate classes. I left, soothed and refreshed by the music.

In the afternoon Miss Lenn taught art, Miss Roberts, who could yawn with her mouth shut, taught English, and Miss Donat (whispered to be a cousin of Robert Donat the actor), taught French. And of course fiery Miss Brady, the knuckle rapper, taught Latin. Miss Brown taught physics, weighing crystals on one side of a tiny scale, miniature tin weights on the other side, writing down measurements, each only a fraction different from the other. I was interested in the grand, the passionate, the romantic, even the religious gesture, not tiny, tinny little weights. Their minute differences made me crazy. I sometimes thought, while weighing crystals, of my Zada in London, weighing pound bags of barley, rice, and beans in the granary.

Miss Brown plunged her hand inside the cross-over neckline of her brown dress to yank a gold watch from the depths of her

enormous bosom.

"Could a spinster really have such huge breasts?" I whispered to Rita.

Rita, herself already buxom said, "Of course."

Miss Lenn, with a yellow-white cloud of hair, thin and transparent as a slice of lemon, sang, "Won't you buy, my pretty flowers," and other old London street songs in a quavering voice while she taught us how to draw, paint, make clay pots, weave baskets, and carve wood cuts. Although my other grades kept slipping, those in art soared.

After school I came home and finished homework. When Helen and Brian came home, we all had supper. Afterwards Brian and Helen often went to a pub, but I was too young. There was nothing for me to do in the evenings. I had no friends. Moira had gone back to Dublin.

If weeknights were dead, Sunday nights in Ely were even deader. The town square and the one block of shops were shuttered and deserted, the one cinema was closed. Because of the blackout there were no lights.

The tedium of Sundays was broken one day by Yvonne de Bled.

Yvonne, fifteen, was a year my senior and the most beautiful girl in the school. She was blonde and blue-eyed, had perfect skin, round breasts, a small waist, and long legs. She wore her hair turned under all around in the fashionable pageboy, without

one hair out of place. She was always cool and collected, like her hair. Every girl admired her and tried to befriend her.

She was something of a mystery. She had transferred from some other school, perhaps even from Belgium, the rumor went, and was a year behind, so she was put into our class. Because of the clothes' ration, transfer students didn't have to buy the new school uniform (my annual scholarship stipend paid for new uniforms when I grew out of the old one). Yvonne wore her own, perfect 'civilian' clothes instead of our heavy uniforms. Her figure, in the lavender hand-knitted cardigan and skirt, the sweater clinging to her breasts, was the envy of all us younger girls. The girls in our class so adulated her that we didn't pay attention in class. Because of this she was moved into the class ahead, even though she wasn't ready for it.

This dream girl had never spoken to me until one day she suddenly asked, "Would you like to go for a walk on Sunday?"

"Y-y-yes," I stuttered, overwhelmed at such an honor.

"Call for me at four," she said and walked off.

When the clock handle moved toward four on Sunday afternoon, I dashed to the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mrs. Gotobed said, looking up from the Church News.

"Yvonne de Bled asked me to go for a walk."

"Ah, a real lady, that one. You should try to be like her. I know her mother. She's a distant relative. Go on with you

then. Be back in time for supper and behave yourself."

"Thank you Mrs. Gotobed," I said.

Almost trembling with awe I knocked on Yvonne's door precisely at four. Her foster mother's house was ordinary, considering it held a princess in it.

"Goodbye," she called to someone I couldn't see, probably her foster mother, as she came through the screen door. As we walked I felt silly in my school uniform, she in her beautiful civilian clothing. Yvonne neither looked at me nor spoke to me. I couldn't help but wonder why, among all her admirers, she chose me to accompany her.

We walked quite a way. I didn't know where we were going, I was too shy to ask. She stared straight ahead. I was so basking in the honor of having this sought-after girl ask humble *me* to go for a walk with her, that I didn't notice in which direction we were walking. Then I realized we were going to the park.

Ely Cathedral was surrounded by Ely Park. The park had many green hills and free-roaming cows that left liberal mounds of their dung on the grassy hillocks. One of the girlish pleasures of my class was to roll down the green slopes. As we rolled down, we cleverly twisted our bodies so as to avoid the scattered dung patties. We were proud of our artful dodges, twists and turns, always landing at the bottom of the hill, triumphant and unsullied. Yvonne de Bled, so clean and neat, would have been disgusted had she known what we younger girls did

for amusement.

Arriving with Yvonne, I noticed a group of tall boys of about sixteen, exquisitely dressed in the uniform of the Ely Cathedral Boys' High School. These boys, with their well-cut gray wool flannels and blazers and their thick, blond hair looked like upper-class Englishmen. The group stood languidly on top of one of the hills like kings, chatting and playing conkers.

The boys stood in pairs. A boy in each pair held a conker or chestnut pierced in the center and threaded onto a tough string. A knot at the bottom of the string stopped it from slipping off. One boy stood still with his conker hanging down from the string in a plumb line. The other swung his conker against the boy holding his straight and tried to smash his opponent's. If the challenger broke the other boy's conker, he added the loser's conker to his own string. The more conkers he won, the better champion he proved himself to be. The more conkers on his string, the harder the owner could hit.

"I got yours," shouted one dark-haired boy jubilantly as his string of chestnuts struck the other boy's. He added the loser's conker to the three on the end of his string.

The boy whose blazer I had tugged at the market and who had hit me with a snowball was whirling his conker by the string, ready to strike another boy's conker. "Come on, Paul, don't take all day," I heard his opponent say.

Paul was the tallest, fairest and handsomest of all the

boys. Without breaking her stride, Yvonne de Bled left me and made a beeline for Paul. He smashed his opponent's conker, took it, and greeted Yvonne with a wide, white, charming smile.

They spent the next hour together on the grassy hill under the oaks, heads close, frequently bursting into laughter. I sat alone and bored at the bottom of the hill near a cowpat.

I'd been an idiot to have been taken in by Yvonne's sudden friendship. Why should a princess suddenly befriend a peasant if not to use her? Her foster mother was probably aware of Yvonne's popularity with boys, and had no doubt forbidden her to go out with them. I was her decoy to get her out of the house. And she hadn't made even the least attempt to be friendly to me.

After an hour I saw her look at her watch then at Paul. I sauntered up the slope with a smile.

"It's time to go," I said and gave her a quick shove.

She fell, rolling down screaming, through the cowdung, unpracticed in how to avoid the patties. She wailed as she rolled down the hill, gathering momentum until she landed, covered in brown, at the bottom of the hill.

Cowdung and green grass covered her beautiful lavender sweater and stuck in clumps to her smooth blonde hair.

"I'll tell your foster mother, you clot," she cried.

"Why don't you call for me sometime," I said, and skipped home.

One backward glance showed Paul, still on top of the hill with his mouth wide open. He did not go down to help Yvonne.

"You're late for supper," Mrs. Gotobed snapped as I walked in the door.

"So sorry," I said, and grinned at her.

I was almost asleep, laughing to myself over Yvonne when Mrs. Gotobed, wearing her green dressing gown, slid silently into my room and sat on the end of my bed. The bedsprings creaked. All I could see was her shadowy frame and the silhouette of her Alfred Hitchcock profile as the moon peeped through the clouds. Then she was plunged again into darkness. The house was deathly silent. She leaned toward me and spoke softly, confidentially.

"My husband, Mr. Gotobed, comes to me in the night, just like this. He sits and talks to me as I'm talking to you, now. It doesn't frighten me, I like him to visit. He tells me how much he misses me. I got married quite late, you know, and he was much older than me. We were very happy, but we were only married two years and he died."

Then she slid out as silently as she had come in. My eyes were wide open, in case Mr. Gotobed decided to visit me, too. I was afraid to go to sleep until dawn.

Next morning at breakfast, Mrs. Gotobed made no mention of her creeping into my room. She was cool and crisp as usual. I wondered if I'd dreamed it. But one month later she sat on my

bed in the dark, again.

"My dear husband visited me again last night. He told me it was all right to lend you the Anthony Trollope books. He still misses me terribly."

She sighed. I stayed silent, not knowing which one of us was mad. She slid out of the door as silently as she'd come in.

"Hallo, Mrs. Gotobed," I said as I walked in the next day.

Mrs. Gotobed stuck her nose in the air, northwest.

"I heard what you did to Yvonne de Bled," she said. "You're a disgrace." Yvonne must have written a note to Mrs. Gotobed. "You're confined to the house for a month."

Soon after, Ely buzzed with news that its first music hall would be coming to town. It would play on the stage of the one local cinema.

"Can I go to the show?" I asked Mrs. Gotobed, "please?"

She looked at me severely. "You've been bad. You're not supposed to go out at night, but your month is nearly up. You can go, but you have to be back by nine. My husband comes at nine-thirty and I don't want to be disturbed by you crashing in."

I thought she only let me go because she'd confided in me about her husband and was afraid I'd tell someone. Until that moment it had never occurred to do so. Who would I tell?

"I'll be in by nine," I promised, even though the show began at eight. One hour would be better than nothing.

At seven on the night of the show, I arrived at the end of a mile-long line outside the theater. I didn't notice any other school kids, nor even teachers, thank goodness. If the teachers saw me, they were sure to have some objection. A music hall show was probably too low-class for them. But I'd seen such shows in London's East End with Old Mother Riley and other comedians.

After an hour in line, I finally reached the box office. It was getting dark and searchlights were already scouring the skies.

"One, please," I said, putting down two half-crowns.

"Sorry, that's not enough, it's fifteen bob."

"Oh," I groaned, turning away, "I waited so long."

"Half a mo," said an upper-class man's voice behind me. "I'll pay the difference."

A gold braided sleeve appeared, with money in hand, and laid it on the counter. The arm belonged to a tall, handsome officer. A shy young woman clutched his navy officer's sleeve.

"Thanks, thanks very much," I said.

He blushed, the way British men and women do when found out being kind, and lowered his head like a giraffe, to the box-office window. "Two, please," he said.

I bounded ahead inside. The cinema was hot and already packed. All the seats were filled with expectant people chatting away, but I didn't care. I stood in the aisle on the carpeted floor, carpets themselves a luxury, leaning against the wall with

crowds of other people. Out at night by myself in a theater, I felt very grown up. It was almost like being in London. It was eight-fifteen when the ceiling lights went down, the stage lit up, and a big, "Oooh," went up from the audience.

A band began to play.

A very pretty girl, wearing a man's suit cut away in front to show all of her long legs, pranced onto the stage. She wore black silk stockings, a rare luxury, high heels, a black silk top hat and a fancy walking stick the way they did for pantomimes at Christmas. Prancing about the stage in those long, black silk legs, swinging her stick, she began to sing.

"Come on, join in," she cried, and we all, joy-starved people in the boondocks of Ely, joined her, singing "Alice Blue Gown," "Loch Lomond," and "I Love a Lassie." Then we all sang with her:

> There was I, waiting at the church,
> Waiting at the church waiting at the church,
> When I found he'd left me in the lurch
> Lor' how it did upset me!
> All at once he sent me round a note,
> Here's the very note, This is what he wrote
> Sorry I can't marry you today,
> My wife, won't let me!

We all roared with laughter and sang it again.

Next came a juggler, then dogs walking on their hind legs. A man dressed up as a woman told some dirty jokes, then some acrobats leapt over each other, juggled balls, and a fat lady sang. Then the people on the stage sang, "Doing the Lambeth Walk, Hoy," and everybody got up and danced in the aisles,

wriggling and bumping their behinds together on "hoy." Booba and Mummy would have been scandalized. I knew it was *prost*, vulgar, but I didn't care.

I was having a wonderful time when I suddenly looked at my watch. It was nine o'clock. I decided to stay until it was over. Mrs. Gotobed went to bed by nine. She'd fall asleep and never know I had disobeyed her. The doors were never locked so I could easily sneak in.

After many songs and bawdy jokes, the entire cast dressed as the pearlies--their coats, trousers, skirts and hats sewn all over with hundreds of pearl buttons--came onto the stage together. They sang "Knees Up Mother Brown," their arms around each other's shoulders, kicking up their legs, dancing and singing just like the *yoks* in East London, in the street after the pubs closed. It made me so homesick. I sang at the top of my voice:

Oi, knees up Mother Brown
Yer drawers are falling down
Under the table you must go
Ee- i- ee- i- ee- i- Oh!
If I catch you napping
I'll tear your drawers right off
Oi, knees up knees up don't get the breeze up
Knees up Mother Brown!

We all clapped and sang along until tears of laughter flowed down our cheeks, which turned into real tears for me because the show was ending and I had to go back to Mrs. Gotobed instead of London. When would the bloody war end so I could go home?

Everybody rose and sang, "God Save the King."

I ran alone through the quiet, deserted streets, lit up only by the searchlights hungrily scouring the skies for enemy planes. I thought I heard the vroom, vroom, vroom of Messerschmidts and hoped I'd get home before they came. They never had dropped a bomb on Ely but they might.

The silent house was in darkness. Helen and Brian were either asleep or at the pub. They wouldn't tell on me even if they saw me.

I took off my shoes and holding them in my hand crept up the stairs, wincing with each creak. I'd just reached my room and was stealthily turning the handle of my bedroom door when the dim shape of a short man appeared on the landing. An unearthly white light shone all around his body. I gave a small scream, then clapped my hand over my mouth as he brushed by me in the darkness as he was leaving Mrs. Gotobed's bedroom. In the searchlights that streamed through the landing window his eyes shone green like a cat's.

"Good evening," he said, pleasantly, raising his hat, "do you like my Anthony Trollope books?" and went down the stairs.

I stared after him open-mouthed.

11

Last Days in Ely

Mrs. Gotobed's Monday washdays were holy. She idolized clean linen. Monday mornings she bent like the witch in Hansel and Gretel, to light the little fireplace under the huge vat of water built into the kitchen corner, the latest advance in laundry technology. She'd spend the day happily washing, rinsing, and mangling clothes and sheets. She'd take the sopping wet clothes out of the vat, stick them into the mangle and turn its handle. The two rolling pins turned in opposite directions squeezing out all the water. Then she'd hang the week's laundry outside on the line, pegs in her mouth, humming the whole time. When all the laundry was hung she gave a great smile. This was the only time she smiled. Her face appeared odd.

One spring morning I awoke itching violently. I found red spots of blood dotted all over Mrs. Gotobed's pristine white sheets. I must have scratched myself and bled in my sleep. When she saw my face at breakfast, Mrs. Gotobed said, "Good gracious," and rushed upstairs.

"Look what you've done to my white sheets," she screamed, coming downstairs. "Get out, go to the school nurse and don't come back."

I didn't care. I didn't like the widow Gotobed, though I had a sneaking liking for her husband. He wasn't a scary ghost at all. Quite friendly he'd been when he'd visited her that night

after the music-hall show, with that white sheen all around him and his glowing green eyes. Raised his hat to me on the stairs as if I were a lady.

I walked to school on an empty stomach.

"You've got scabies," the nurse said, examining my spots.

"What's scabies?"

"Mites that bury themselves under your skin and make you itch. You're contagious. You'll have to stay at the quarantine house. Get into a nightie you'll find there and go to bed."

She scribbled the address on a scrap of paper and I left.

How had I caught scabies? Perhaps I'd caught it at the variety show standing close to all those strange people. It didn't hurt, and the itching was mild so I didn't care. I'd be free of school and teachers for a week or so.

I walked into the unlocked door of the quarantine house. It was silent and empty. I found one room filled with beds, a nightie on one of them. I changed into it, got under the sheets and fell asleep. When I awoke, I found a tray of food next to me. This happened several times. Perhaps I really was sick because meals appeared without me noticing anyone bringing them. My bed was made each day. Someone put me into a special bath each morning, but I didn't notice who. I seemed to be living in the fairy story Beauty and the Beast in which invisible servants provided all my needs. I waited for the Beast to appear, but the house remained silent and empty.

Wandering barefoot on wooden floors in my nightie, I came across a wonderful library full of forbidden books. I'd never have found such reading in the small Ely library, and certainly not at Mrs. Gotobed's house. The book I chose was about a handsome Arab who kidnapped a beautiful young woman. Brandishing his scimitar, he threatened to cut off her breast if she refused to let him have his way with her. I imagined myself to be the beautiful virgin faced with the terrible decision whether to "give in" to this passionate man and lose her purity or not to and lose her breast. I'd be forced to make love without being married.

Sex was a mystery to me. All I knew was what I saw on the screen, as handsome actors held and kissed beautiful women and said, "I love you." That was as far as my imagination stretched. I knew babies grew in the mother's stomach but I didn't know how the baby got in there in the first place. I knew it hurt when the baby was born, because Mummy had told me I had hurt her and torn her womb, but I didn't know what a womb was. Male anatomy was a total mystery. I knew there was more to making love but I didn't know what it was. Virginity was fiercely guarded until the wedding night when all would be revealed in a blinding flash of love. The thought of being forced to make love was both terrible and thrilling. I was enthralled at the danger, the mystery, the thought of "making love," whatever that was. Mummy said she'd heard it could be beautiful. Would the heroine find it was

beautiful?

I had to finish this book before quarantine was over. As there was no electricity in the house and no electric light, I read the book from dawn until, straining my eyes, dusk fell. I finished the book the day quarantine ended and I was sent out of the house.

The nurse at school told me I would have to take brewer's yeast daily for two weeks. It was the treatment for scabies. Each day at four, after school, I ran to the outskirts of town to the huge red-brick brewery which closed at 4.30 p.m. I'd run to the back of the brewery and rap on a green metal door with no handle. The door sprang open. Out popped a man holding a spoon of brewer's yeast which he stuck in my mouth. Then, like a jack-in-the-box, he popped back behind his door. The whole event took five seconds. The brewer's yeast, tasted so nauseating I nearly vomited each time the spoon left my mouth.

I was also sent to a new foster home. As soon as I saw the gold encrusted naval officer's cap hanging on a hook, I knew my new foster parent was the young naval officer who had paid for my entry into the variety show. His young wife blushed when she saw me. I thanked them again. I only stayed there for two days, however, and then I was moved to the Taylor's house. No one told me why.

Mr. Taylor, my new foster father, was a tall, skinny

fireman, cheerful even though at thirty-five, he had no teeth. His plump wife hardly spoke to me. She did daily char work early mornings but came back to polish the kitchen fire grate to a gleaming black, and make us delicious mushy treacle or onion suet puddings for lunch. My foster sister, fourteen-year-old Sylvia, would soon finish school and go to work in the local jam factory. She was the most grown-up foster sister I'd had. Flo was so much older than me, she had been more like a foster parent than a foster sister.

Sylvia spoke rarely, but always gently, to me. She was tall and willowy, with pretty blue eyes and thin blonde hair. She smiled to herself a lot, as if enjoying a secret joke. Even when her mother said, "Gilda hardly takes any sugar on her cereal, why do you take so much?" she was still kind to me. I wished Mrs. Taylor wouldn't compare us. I didn't like sugar. It was no virtue to take so little of it.

Every evening during the summer Sylvia went out to meet friends in the alleys behind the houses. I wondered what they did, so I was surprised and pleased when she said one evening, "Want to come?"

"Oh, thanks, I'd love to."

It was about nine in the evening, late summer, and dark. All the blackout curtains were up. The searchlights crisscrossed the skies. From an open window somewhere, Frank Sinatra's voice

floated out on the soft breeze singing:

Moonlight becomes you,
It goes with your hair,
You certainly know the right things to wear.

Since the Yanks had come to Ely, we heard a lot more American songs on the wireless. Outside, about ten boys and girls in their teens smoked and nervously jostled each other. The boys looked scrawny and raffish. The girls were all slender and blonde, like Sylvia. I felt strange, being the only short, dark-haired, Jewish girl. We played Postman's Knock. Tessa, a friend of Sylvia's asked me a question. I couldn't answer it. The questioner chose the penalty.

"Your penalty is: Bert has to kiss you," Tessa said.

I thought a man kissing a woman was supposed to be romantic. We girls sighed over Clarke Gable and Laurence Olivier. I looked at Bert. I was alarmed at the prospect of being kissed by this unappealing runt.

Bert was about my height, which was five foot one inch, and skinny. He had rotten, yellow teeth and wore cheap clothes, a far cry from Clark Gable or Laurence Olivier. He pushed me against a brick wall while everyone watched, grinning. I held my breath. I'd never been kissed by a boy. And now I was to be kissed in public by someone I'd never met before and didn't like on sight. I thought of running away but didn't want to embarrass Sylvia. I closed my eyes, since that's what all the women did in films. I thought of the passionate Arab lover. How would he have kissed

me? His lips would have been hot I imagined. I felt Bert's mouth on mine. It was cold and wet. His breath stank of stale cigarettes and beer. Kissing had looked wonderful when Cary Grant's lips met Joan Fontaine's. Bert's kiss made me want to retch. It reminded me of eating raw yeast.

After Bert stuck me up against the wall, he did a little jig and sang:

> It's only human nature after all
> When a boy sticks a girl against the wall.
> Dogs do it, cats do it, monkeys have a try
> Ma does it, pa does it
> Why shouldn't I?

I didn't think he meant just kissing. I'd seen the back of a Yank's head and back jerking up and down in a dark shop doorway. Everyone laughed but I was so embarrassed I ran back into the house. Sylvia never invited me to join the group again.

It was the summer of 1943. The Allies were finally beating back the Germans. There was new hope that the war would end soon. In the meantime, Ely social life was picking up. The town began holding Saturday night dances for civilians, besides the usual dances in American and British canteens, which young girls like me could never walk into. I did once put my school coat over my uniform, crushed my school hat under my coat and pressed through the crowds in a military canteen. The air was thick with the smell of smoke, beer, perfume, and perspiration. One could hardly move among the bodies of soldiers and girls. Gay laughter

and cigarette smoke swirled up to the ceiling.

A slim young British airman, a lock of dark hair falling into his eyes, played on a shining black grand piano, "You will soon be mine my lovely Russian Rose." We'd just become allies with Russia after the Germans stupidly invaded them. He changed to "I'm making believe it's you in my arms, and dancing like we used to do. . ." The songs were all romantic, reflecting my longing to be close to someone dear. Tears rose to my eyes. The airman in blue paused between each song to sip from the beer on the piano. When he lifted the glass, it left a ring of foam on the shiny black piano. Then, bending over the piano, he switched to jazz, as drops of perspiration from his forehead fell onto the black shiny keys and glittered there.

On the dance floor, Yanks with bored eyes chewed gum, as they jitterbugged fluidly with pretty girls, throwing them over their shoulders and between their legs, the girls' short skirts whirling. Although my grandmother would have been horrified at their vulgarity, I envied them madly. If only I were seventeen, I could be one of those girls laughing and drinking and being wooed by handsome Yanks and British Tommies. I could be hugged and kissed and given presents. I could fall madly in love with someone handsome and he would love me forever.

But I was only a fourteen-year-old evacuee. I didn't fit in with this crowd, any more than I fit in with Sylvia's crowd, I thought as I slunk out. No one noticed me coming in; no one

noticed me going out. If they did, they ignored the little schoolgirl among the real men and women.

Saturday night was the big night on the town. Girls and boys, British and American soldiers, would walk around the town square once, twice, eight or nine times, some going in one direction others in the opposite, looking for someone, anyone to talk to. Sometimes I spoke to no one and no one spoke to me, but it was better than sitting in the foster home as the family gathered but left me alone in a corner to read a mystery.

The usual Yank's back in a recessed shop door, jerked up and down, the dark outline of a woman's head all I could see. I had only a vague idea of what was going on. One Saturday night a young R.A.F. airman walking in the opposite direction stopped me. It was dark, I could barely see him in the searchlights.

"Like to go for a walk?" he said, offering his arm.

I put my hand on his blue sleeve. The material was soft, not rough and hairy like that of the khaki Tommies' uniform.

We walked to Ely lake. It was cold and deserted. Even the moon glittered coldly on the still waters. I suddenly realized I was totally alone with a stranger. I knew nothing about this young man.

"Let's go back," I said. I was relieved when he agreed.

We returned to the market square and I ran home. We'd hardly exchanged a word. He was as shy as me. So much for romance.

There were only two things to look forward to in Ely, the weekly dance classes and our trips to Woolworth to meet boys. Every Thursday after lunch we evacuee girls aged thirteen and up, trooped over to the Corn Exchange for dance classes. The Corn Exchange was a tall, narrow building with bare blond pine floors. A narrow balcony, about one story high, ran all around the inside of the building. I imagined corn buyers stood on the balcony and looked down at the auctioneers shouting out the price of corn on the main floor. I imagined blond corn heaped on the blond floor, bronzed farmers selling it, yellow sunlight slanting in through the high windows.

Miss Parsons, our young gym teacher, had a beautiful but severe face that was the image of Rudolph Nureyev. Frowning, she wound up the gramophone, set the hook-armed needle on the edge of the record and played "Jealousy."

Norma Gelkoff was a year older than me and in the form above. Like most girls at Spitalfields she was an East End Jew. She was tall, big boned, almost masculine in appearance and weighed, I was sure, twice as much as me. She was a menace on the hockey field. When I saw her charging down the field like a bull, I would run and hide in a bush. Older girls usually ignored younger girls, so I was honored and scared when she walked up to me, grabbed me round the waist, schlepped me close like a Basque dancer, and belly-to-belly swung me onto the dance floor without speaking a word. She was lightning on the floor and handled me

masterfully just as I imagined a man would, pushing and pulling me lightly but firmly as I followed her every step. Dancing was serious stuff to Norma. Her face was grim, her eyes bulged. She danced like Fred Astaire.

I especially loved dancing the tango with Norma, cheeks pressed together, eyeballs staring upward into space, arms stretched forward, hands clasped in front, sliding and swooping to the music. Our dance ended glamorously as Norma held her left arm out while I dipped far backward on it, hair almost touching the floor. I sang as we danced to the tune of "Jealousy":

> Leprosy, I think I've got leprosy,
> There goes my eyeball, it just fell in your highball
> Oh throw it back please will you?
> Leprosy, I caught it in Tennessee
> While I was dancing, with a girl from Paree.

Although we had to take hats off inside, Norma Gelkoff kept hers on, even while we danced. She put a dent in it all around the top, shortening the crown so that it sat on the back of her head. Miss Senior, the music teacher, said acidly, "Norma Gelkoff keeps her hat on by willpower."

With her bulbous eyes and that hat on the back of her head, Norma looked like a bookie. I didn't care as long as she danced with me. She was mine. I'd have killed anyone else she danced with, but she was faithful to me. As she led me masterfully in a fox trot or tango, I'd shut my eyes and imagine I was a blonde and slender Ginger Rogers in the romantic arms of tall, skinny Fred Astaire, who was crazy about me. Then I'd open my eyes to

see Norma's brown orbs staring into space, her stolid face, which never cracked a smile, and the school hat stuck on the back of her head. Reality returned, and I was back in the Corn Exchange dancing in the arms of a muscular senior girl. If only I looked older, I could dance with a soldier in any canteen.

Next dance class Norma spoke to me for the first time. Her voice was hoarse. "There's a dance competition in Ely. Want to enter?"

"D'you think we have a chance?" I said.

"We'll win," she said. "Call for you tomorrow seven sharp. Dress up," she ordered me.

The next night I ate our fish supper hurriedly and told the Taylors I had to meet a schoolfriend (which was true) to study for a test (untrue). I secretly changed into my scoop neck dress and high heels and ran out of the house into the dark. The figure of a man was waiting behind the garden bushes. I was frightened of this shadowy apparition until the bulbous brown eyes gave her away. It was Norma dressed as a man. She'd cut her hair short and wore a man's suit.

"Norma," I gasped, "is it you?"

"Come on," she said roughly, pulling me by the arm.

We arrived at the newly opened dance hall. Norma paid half-a crown for each of us and pushed me inside the blackout curtain that hung over the door. I blinked at the bright lights. I was

trembling with fear and excitement. The hall was full of real men with their lady partners, all swirling round the room to a Strauss Waltz, the Blue Danube. Norma, whom I'd renamed Norman, guided me round with a firm hand on my back. Round and round, round and round we went, then backward. She then put me under her arm, grasped me again and swirled me fast round the edges of the crowd. Meanwhile a man went round tapping couples on the shoulder to show them they were 'out.'

The music changed to a fox trot, then to a polka, then to a jitterbug and we danced them all, Norman and me. Most couples had left the floor by now. There were only three couples left when the band struck up our favorite and best dance, "Jealousy."

"A tango," I breathed.

Norman's thyrodic eyes glittered briefly as he swung me into our most exotic steps. My skirt flew around me as we strode forward, switched directions sharply and strode the other way. Norman swung me round him then stopped me sharp and held me beside him, arms around me, looking fondly, I thought, into my eyes. We ended with an extravagant dip, Norman's strong arm under my waist, leaning over me, my head flung back, to find we were the last ones on the floor and everyone was clapping wildly.

"You've won a war bond and a box of chocolates for the lady," announced the M.C.

Norman bowed and I curtsied to the crowd. My heart was beating with excitement and joy. We took our rewards and rushed

from the hall like two Cinderellas before our true identities could be discovered. Had they known we were two schoolgirls not even allowed out at night and one a fake man, they certainly would have taken back our prizes. There'd have been a scandal at school as well, with an endless lecture from Miss Menzies.

We ran all the way to Norma's house, though she still hadn't cracked a smile. We sat down on the curb outside her foster-home and ravished the box of chocolates. We hadn't had chocolates for months. She went to the back of the garden, drew out her school clothes from the bushes, and changed into her school uniform.

"Where did you get the man's clothing?" I asked.

"Borrowed them from my foster brother. Have to sneak them back. See you tomorrow," she said. Once again a schoolgirl of fifteen, Norma glided into the dark back door. At the Corn Exchange we danced better than ever, but Norma never once alluded to our night out. For a brief time, I felt I belonged somewhere, even if it were only in Norman Gelkoff's arms once a week on Thursday.

The other 'romantic' highlight of the week in Ely was lunch time at Woolworth's. If we schoolgirls didn't have boyfriends, we certainly had a 'following.' Every day after lunch, our class walked to Woolworth's. The boys from the Jewish Boys' Free School (the same school that Joseph Singer had gone to) also arrived, as if we had a collective date.

The boys were all refugees, orphans. They were probably as lonely as we evacuees, perhaps more so. I didn't really know any refugees except cousin Zalman. I thought evacuees had the worst luck. I didn't realize then that the refugee boys had lost their homes and parents.

About ten of them, also aged fourteen or fifteen, followed us around and around the counters, past lipsticks, past kirby grips which the Yanks called bobby pins, past combs, but skirting sanitary towels. The leader of the boys was the spitting image of Laurence Olivier. We girls were madly in love with both the film star and the boy leader. One day the boys' group, which usually trailed behind us, suddenly turned and came face to face with us in front of bubble baths.

"Laurence" stopped within six feet of us, his followers, glued together, bunched up behind him. The boys stared at us in a longing, puzzled kind of way. They didn't know what to do with us and we didn't know what to do with them. Neither side spoke.

After five minutes of standing stock still and staring at each other, each side turned round and fled in the other direction. We had to get back to school for afternoon classes. From January to June of 1943, we did this, never saying a word to each other, just looking and yearning for romance, for love.

Chapter 12

Wartime London

Until 1942 the Nazis had confidently expected to conquer England as they had Poland, France, Denmark, Norway, Greece, Yugoslavia, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. However, in July of 1942 the British halted the Germans at El Alamein and in November of that year the Allied forces landed in North Africa. In February of 1943 the last Germans at Stalingrad surrendered. In May of 1943, Tunis and Bizerte fell to the Allies and the Allies invaded Sicily.

The Germans sent planes in by day, but these were chopped down by the RAF, so they sent planes under cover of darkness. Night after night they pulverized London, but England remained a fly in the Nazi ointment. "We shall never surrender," Churchill vowed holding up his famous two fingers in the "V" for victory signal, and declaring, "Never, never, never give up."

As the nightly bombs rained down on the city, Londoners simply poured into the underground to sleep in bunks. They played music and ran a lending library down there. Sometimes there were panics to get into the shelters and hundreds of people were trampled to death.

It finally dawned on the Germans that Britain was not going to surrender like other countries, that only full scale invasion would bring her to her knees. The heavy bombing tapered off.

The evacuees, including those at Spitalfields in Ely, began

to drift home to London. Rita Gillis showed me a letter from her mother.

> "It's all right to come back to London now, the bombing's over, or very light. Come home tomorrow. Love and miss you."

I received no such letter. Again I was one of the last ones left. Mummy, as usual, was in no hurry to have me back.

Finally, by summer, there were so few Spitalfields girls left in Ely, that our school there closed down, just as the orphanage had closed. Once again Mummy had no choice but to let me come home.

"I'm going home, I'm going home," I said joyfully to Sylvia. "Now I can be with my own family," I said proudly.

She gave me her cynical smile with a hint of pity in it.

I was sure that when Mummy saw me all grown up and able to look after myself, she'd be happy to see me. At fourteen I'd be no bother to her and could even help her in the house, perhaps in the shop as well.

I eagerly jumped on the train for London. That sparkling autumn day in 1944, Liverpool Street Station was flooded with evacuees in school uniforms returning to London, most met by affectionate parents. I walked the mile home, alone. Mummy greeted me with "So you're back."

Mummy said, "Now, we have to decide where you're going to sleep. You can't sleep anymore on the couch upstairs in the

living room. The roof and the windows there have fallen in. We've boarded up the roof and windows in our bedroom with planks of wood so Daddy and I still sleep upstairs."

"What about the back room?" I said.

"That's rented out to dockers. Some sleep in it in the day and others in a night shift. There's a huge housing shortage you know. You'll have to sleep on the kitchen couch."

"But Daddy naps on it when there's no business and your friends sit on it evenings for hours over cups of tea," I argued.

"We all have to make sacrifices," Mummy said.

That first night I lay in pink pajamas on the kitchen couch, squashed against the wall. I felt stupid in my pajamas among Mummy's well-dressed men and women friends, but I had nowhere else to sleep. I tried to flatten myself against the cold wall so as not to be conspicuous and so Mummy's friends would have room to sit. They sat back comfortably, leaning on me as if I were a cushion, as if I were invisible. I could hardly breathe. They laughed and joked and drank endless cups of tea and crunched black-market biscuits.

In the country I was used to going to bed at nine or ten. The clock struck ten, eleven, twelve. They still laughed and chatted and drank tea. I wished they'd go home. I was longing to sleep, but there was too much noise.

A one o'clock in the morning, I said,"Mummy, I'm really tired, can I go to sleep, now?"

Mummy frowned at me then went on laughing and chatting. I felt guilty spoiling her fun. I was a nuisance as an evacuee and a nuisance at home. I was so tired and disappointed at my homecoming. I'd so looked forward to it but I was no more welcome at home than in my foster homes. I was angry that they wouldn't let me sleep but I dared not say anything more to Mummy. I'd already told her I needed to sleep and she'd ignored me.

The next day, though my eyes were red from fatigue, Mummy acted as if nothing was wrong. I walked to my real school in Spitalfields, London, for the first time. I loved my London school. It was a large, seventeenth century mansion, right next to the wholesale Spitalfield vegetable market. Built by the vegetable guild to educate the children of vegetable workers, it had become a famous high school. Every morning on the way to school, I saw men gracefully carrying five or six stacked round baskets of bright vegetables on their heads--fresh cucumbers, radishes, tomatoes, brussels sprouts, lettuce. They reminded me of the baker in Pharoah's dream.

But at home I felt like an intruder. The dockers, big brawny men, left the back room, so the next day I opened the door thinking it was empty. Perhaps I could sleep there. Two tall, gaunt men in the light blue uniform of the Polish Free Fighters sat at the table. Ruth, a friend of Mummy's, was sitting on the taller airman's lap.

When he saw me at the door he stood up, dropped Ruth on the

floor and came forward smiling, extending his bony hand.

"You look just like Minnie. Are you her sister?"

"No, her daughter," I said coldly, and looked pointedly at Ruth on the floor.

How could she sit in the laps of anti-Semites? It's true I didn't know if *these* Poles were anti-Semitic. I had heard from Booba and Zada, though, that the Poles had been as bad as the Nazis to Jews, raping and killing Jewish women, killing Jewish men, bashing in the brains of Jewish babies or throwing them in the air for target practice. Now Poles faced me a few feet away.

These men frightened me with their hard bodies, skeletal faces, and their pale blue eyes, staring at my breasts and offensively between my legs. I feared their hard, predatory, cynical smiles. Why had Mother rented to such ruffians?

They followed me back to the kitchen where Mummy was drinking tea.

"I didn't know you had a daughter," they said to Mummy.

She usually kept me a secret so she would seem younger.

"Oh, yes," she laughed, "for fourteen years."

I was puzzled as to why she told them my age this time. Later I realized why.

The airmen's cold eyes stared at my mouth, then deliberately into my eyes and again at my breasts. I felt my face flush with embarrassment and anger. Didn't Mummy see how they were looking at me? Why didn't she tell them to stop?

"Excuse me, I have to help my mother," I said.

They bowed from the waist and went back to the room that should have been mine. Why did Mummy give it to strangers, and to strangers with such a bad reputation and with such bold, frightening eyes?

However, I was thrilled to be back in London and thrilled to be home. Most people had no telephone so Mummy's many friends dropped in day and night. I was never lonely, now.

There was Gertie Franks, whose husband, Mummy told me, just disappeared one day with every stick of furniture Gertie had bought with her wedding dowry.

Milly Lightman came with her St. Vitus Dance tic which fascinated me. She brought her unmarried milliner sister Rose, the pocket Venus with the enormous nose, and Millie's husband Lou, a tailor and Trade Union organizer. He'd fought the Mosley Fascists at the Cable Street Battle. Too old to be in the army, he was doing essential work in London.

Mummy also had several male admirers who came round evenings for tea and biscuits. Daddy went upstairs to sleep early, leaving her to her friends. She once told me this story:

"This man, Sid, was very keen on me. One day he got me on the couch and was ready to do his business. I said to him, 'Just let me undo my corset, Sid,' and when he stood up I gave him a *putsch* across the head with a rolling pin and told him to scram."

We both laughed.

"Speaking of corsets," Mummy said, "now you're fourteen, it's time we visited the corsetière for a fitting."

I supposed it was normal for a girl of fourteen to wear a laced-up corset. The corsetière fitted me with a peach-colored whalebone corset and my stomach was hooked and laced up, hard as a board. You could knock on it. I felt proud and grown-up.

At night there were still some bombing raids. First we'd hear the buzz, buzz, buzz of the Messerschmidts, so unlike the steady, soothing roar of our Hurricanes and Spitfires. One evening I was alone at the cinema, when the siren wailed. Bombs started dropping with heavy thuds and crashes. The silver screen silently crumbled and slid slowly down to the stage. All sound from the film died away. The crumbling screen and the black hole behind it seemed more ominous to me than a bombshell. We all walked, slowly and silently as trained, toward the exit. I ran home fast, through the dropping bombs.

At home Mummy hurried me into the coal cellar under the stairs. There we crouched, her body covering mine, as it had three years before. I hated the scream of the whistling bombs. Just before they struck there was dead silence for a minute and then, BOOM, earth-shaking crashes as the whole house rocked.

In spite of the war or because of it, business was good, much better than it had been before the war. People had money and not much to spend it on since everything was rationed. But shaves

and haircuts, sets and perms, manicures, men on leave and nights in the pub were not rationed. Especially on Friday and Saturday nights the shop was jammed. Smoke filled the air from the men sitting on the horsehair sofa and puffing on cigarettes. Laughter came from the women's side, over which music from the BBC (there were only two stations) played from the wireless.

No matter how slow trade was during the week in the shop, Friday night and Saturday were always lively with customers. The men sat four in a row waiting for Daddy or Wally to give them a haircut, singe, shave, or a hot towel. The women on Mummy's side had haircuts, shampoos, peroxide, sets and perms.

"You can help me take out the pins," Mummy said.

I began taking out the pins from Mrs. Thompson's curls at the nape of her neck. She still liked the old fashioned style, corrugated waves with pin curls at the bottom of her hair. The women's curtain was drawn open because of the heat, and I could see the men clearly.

Jock, a regular, was sitting with the others on the sofa and smoking a Players. He had a shock of dark hair and a chin blue with stubble. He blew smoke rings into the air. How did he do that, I wondered in amazement. He was flipping through a magazine, looking at the pictures, but I didn't know if he could read. He stopped blowing smoke rings for a moment to stare up at a picture of Betty Grable on a wall calendar, sitting on a high stool, leaning back with long, bare legs crossed, her feet in

high-heeled shoes. Mummy said her legs had been insured for a million dollars. I was sure she'd never cross a railway track.

The bell over the door jangled as Bertie came in. He was a stocky red head, strong as an ox. He wore a blue striped shirt and black and white check trousers held up by red suspenders.

"Wotcha cock?" Bertie said to Jock.

"Wotcha cock," Jock said, looking up from his magazine.

They were both dockers. I could see the muscles bulging on their arms and shoulders. Those men made me feel safe.

"Next," Daddy said, whipping the white sheet off of Tommie Bradford, brushing him down with a clothes' brush. Brushing a man down to get him out was one of the two times Daddy moved fast. He could also run fast. When kids would shove open the door and yelled, "Dirty Jew," setting the bell on top of the door jangling harshly, he raced into the street after them. He ran like a greyhound, but they always disappeared into the barrack-like Workmen's Council flats. Otherwise Daddy was slow as a turtle.

"Gimme a Red Letter, Alf," Tommie Bradford said. Daddy pulled out one of the little inch square red envelopes with the rubber fish inside. Before the war, when Daddy brought the week's supply back from the wholesaler's, I used to stick the red envelopes all around the barbershop mirrors.

The man paid Daddy and gave him a tip. Most customers didn't tip the shop owner, they just tipped Wally, his assistant.

"Ta," Dad said, looking into the man's eyes. He dropped the money into a drawer next to the mirror. "Next," he said to the men on the couch.

"Shave, 'aircut an' 'ot towel, Alf," Jock said loudly, settling his behind in Daddy's chair, elbows on the chair arms.

Bertie sat down on the sofa to wait his turn, striking a match and lighting his coffin nail. A man got up from Wally's chair and paid him.

"Next, please," Wally said. Sometimes my uncles Max or Sam helped Daddy in rush times, like Christmas or Easter when everyone wanted their hair done. Wally was always there. He was my friend. But some men would wait for my father. "He's the best barber in London," Mummy bragged, but at home she'd scream at him, "Why do you charge tuppence more than everyone else? You lose us business."

"Because I'm the best," he'd answer.

Bertie sat in Wally's chair.

"Shave an' 'aircut, Wally," he said, sitting, with a sigh.

The laborers and dockers worked half or full day Saturdays, and Saturday was payday, so Friday and especially Saturday nights were the biggest nights at the pub. Even those who used to be on the dole before the war had a pint in the pub Saturday night. Some drank up their whole dole and had no food for their wife or children, Mummy said. She said that after the pub closed they went home to 'do' or beat their wives or both.

There was a pub on almost every corner. The East End pubs smelt of a mixture of piss and beer. The men's doors of pub lavatories opened right out onto the street. After all, you didn't want that stink inside the pub, did you? If you happened to walk past a pub as a gent was coming out of the toilet buttoning his fly, you'd almost be bowled over by the stink.

Each pub had its regulars, and a piano man who, Friday and Saturday nights, played tinny tunes while everybody sang songs cheerily together at the top of their voices. I could hear them singing all evening. As the night went on the voices grew slurry.

The wireless in the shop was playing, and a woman was singing,

"Red Sails in the Sunset,"
Way out on the sea,
Oh carry my loved one
Home safely to me,

We kept the wireless on the 'light' channel for the customers, though Mummy loved the other channel which played classical music and opera. She played opera at home on the wireless and on the gramophone.

Dad cut Jock's hair, slathered Brylcreem on it and combed it flat until it gleamed like Cary Grant's. Then he dipped the wooden chair all the way back until Jock was lying flat, his Adam's Apple sticking up in the air like a white top. Daddy began slowly 'stropping' his silver razor with its yellow bone handle. It flashed under the brilliant shop lights as he swished it over and over on the leather strap to sharpen its blade. He dipped

the fat, round shaving brush into his King George V shaving mug. On the mug was a picture of old King George V with his pointy beard and Queen Mary with her choker of pearls. Daddy sloshed shaving cream all over Jock's face, picking up Jock's nose with his thumb and forefinger to smear the cream on the upper lip. Dad cocked the blade and began sweeping it across the man's cheek. How did he get the stubble off without cutting him?

Jock Lambert lay back trustingly, throat stretched, his large Adam's Apple waiting to be slit, and Daddy deftly zipped the wicked blade along the skin, then wiped the soap and stubble on a thin sheet of paper over Jock's chest. On the wall behind Daddy hung the glittering hot towel urn in shiny silver. Four holes in the bottom showed the leaping fierce blue-red gas flames. They sent steam to the top of the urn, making the fluffy white towels on top, scalding hot.

With his thumb and forefinger, Dad lifted a steaming hot towel off of the hissing urn, tossed it from hand to hand, then wrapped it swiftly around Jock's face in folds, leaving only the tip of his pink nostrils peeking out at the ceiling. How could he breathe with such a small piece of his nose sticking out? Daddy took a leisurely sip of tea, which Mummy had made him, and, munching on a Peak Frean chocolate biscuit, stared into space. I could see him thinking all the time. What did he think about so much? While he ate, white steam from the face towel on Jock poured up toward the ceiling, hitting it and flattening out like

a squashed white spider.

Jock didn't move, he lay there as if he was dead. Maybe he *was* dead. I got very worried while he lay there so still, wrapped up like an Egyptian Mummy I'd once seen in the Museum with Daddy. I couldn't even see Jock breathing and bit my thumbnail all the way down after taking out the pins from Mrs. Thompson's hair. I wished Daddy would hurry up and take the white towel off Jock's face so I could see he was alive. Dad moved back slowly toward the still man and just when I thought for sure he was dead, flipped the white towel off. Jock's face was glowing pink like a pig's. Even his eyeballs were shiny and clean. He was smiling.

"Ah, that was a bit of awlright, Alf," he said.

"Which after-shave?" Dad asked, pointing to the dazzling red, green and blue lotions in shining glass bottles. Each bottle had a big, fat glass stopper in it.

"I fink I'll 'ave the red, Alf," Jock said.

Dad slapped on the red after-shave lotion, whipped off the white cloth covering Jack's clothes and shook it out, scattering hair all over the floor. It was Wally's job to sweep it up. The young man sprang up, handsome, clean, though God knows if and when he took a bath. He was going to be called up next week. Dad brushed Jock's clothes down.

"Ta, Alf. Tara," Jock said, the way cockneys said goodbye, as he paid Daddy.

"Next," Dad shouted, not knowing he was shouting. I could never guess if he was going to shout or speak softly.

Meanwhile Mummy was setting Mrs. Crown's hair, behind the cotton curtain. Mrs. Lyons was under the perm machine. Mummy made waves in Mrs. Crown's hair then clipped metal-toothed grips which looked like sharks' teeth into the waves to make them corrugated. She curled the hair at the bottom into pin curls--little circles like snails, then poked a kirby grip in each one to hold it in place. This was Booba's hairstyle, which older women wore. Modern women, like Aunty Regina, wore their hair straight but rolled up all around the bottom, the front and sides. Mummy still wore an old-fashioned wavy shingle.

Mummy kept up a chatter about films, film stars and the weather, a favorite British topic when no one could think what to say. She cut short any customer who tried to tell her secrets.

"Never let a woman tell you too intimate secrets. She'll only get embarrassed and you lose a customer," she often told me. But sometimes she couldn't stop a customer in time.

Mrs. Crown was saying to Mummy, "So I says to 'er, I says, 'Oi, Florry, do you know that Dicky Smith's a married man? Watcha want to go wiv 'im for?'"

"He's not only married, his wife's got a bun in the oven, she's due any day," Mummy said.

"That Florry don't care nuffink about 'is wife. She's a right cow, she is. 'Ere, d'you know what she done last week?"

"No, what?" Mummy said, in spite of her rule.

"She went round to 'is wife, banged on the door and said, 'In case you wants to know, me and Dickie is 'aving it off and you can kiss 'im good-bye, 'e's coming to live wiv me.' And there's the poor wife with six kids and anover one on the way."

"It doesn't say much for the husband," Mummy said.

"Oh well, what d'you expect of a man. He likes to have his crumpet and then some on the side. Boys will be boys," and Mrs. Crown laughed.

Just at that moment a big fat louse ran down the back of Mrs. Crown's head, and Mummy smartly cut it in two while saying to Mrs. Crown, "Florry usually comes in here for a shampoo and set but I haven't seen her this week."

"You won't tell her what I said, will you?" Mrs. Crown said.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Mummy said. "Now I'm going to put you under the dryer and make you a nice cup of tea," Mummy said, trying to change the subject.

Mummy put a thick net over Mrs. Crown's hair, tying it behind her head, tucked cotton wool inside the net over her ears so the heat from the dryer didn't burn them, and popped Mrs. Crown under the dryer. She switched it on and it roared warm air.

"My goodness, gracious me," Mummy said to herself, "You wouldn't believe the things I hear."

Mummy made a cup of tea with milk in the scullery behind the shop on the small gas stove. She chose one of the cracked cups

she kept for customers. "They've got so much T.B., it's catching, we don't want them using our cups," Mummy said. "Take this to Mrs. Crown." She put in the saucer two cracked biscuits, bought cheaper than whole biscuits, two lumps of sugar, and a spoon. I carried the teacup careful not to spill any, to Mrs. Crown.

"Ta, love," Mrs. Crown said gratefully.

Mrs. Lyons was having a perm. She looked like a picture of a Medusa with long, black squirming snakes on her head. Each of the black curler covers was attached to a long black wire, and each black wire stretched all the way up to a metal plate almost touching the ceiling. The huge perm machine was plugged into an electric outlet and Mummy timed how long the woman had to stay under. If a curl smoked it meant it was overdone. A piece of overdone hair simply fell off the woman's scalp leaving a bald spot and a screaming customer. The curlers and wires were so heavy that the perms couldn't turn their heads, so Mrs. Lyon's arm wafted out like the antenna of an insect to take her cup of tea.

"Oh, ta, dearie, just what I need, a good strong cuppa," she said. Looking straight ahead she stirred her tea and milk with the spoon. She raised the tea cup up to her face. I was glad I had naturally curly hair.

I loved the smell of the shop, a mixture of ammonia and after shave lotion; acrid and sweet, like the smell in Mummy and Daddy's bedroom in the mornings. That smell also meant home.

Mummy had just tucked Mrs. Crown under the dryer with a cup of tea and had checked Mrs. Lyons' perm and all was quiet when the door suddenly flew open with a jangle of the bells and in stalked Florry Dawson, the woman they'd been talking about.

"Minnie," she said, flouncing from the men's section into the women's on four inch red heels. She had a smashing figure and she knew it: a big bust, tiny waist and round hips. Her long legs stretched beneath the shortest dress in the neighborhood. All the men were staring.

"I know I didn't make an appointment but can you do me, now? I got a special date, tonight and I want to look really spiffing."

She tossed her long mane of curly blonde hair over her shoulders and blinked her green eyes with the long mascaraed lashes, up and down like a fan.

Mummy looked nervously at Mrs. Crown. Mrs. Crown, head and eyes under the dryer, hadn't seen or heard Florry Dawson come in.

"Could you possibly come back in an hour?" Mummy said, hoping to get Florry Dawson out before Mrs. Crown was finished.

"Oh, no, I need it now. You could do me quick while them others is under the dryer and perm machine. You ain't got no one in the basin. You could wash me quick and pop me under the dryer. Couldn'tcher?"

While Mummy was trying to figure out what to say, in rushed a pregnant woman with a big belly. She rushed over to Florry,

grabbed a huge handful of Florry's blonde hair in her hand and pulled it as hard as she could screaming, "You cow, I'm going to get you for trying to take my husband away, I'm going to pull all your hair out 'till you're bald," and she began pulling Florry Dawson's long hair from the roots.

"You sodding bitch," screamed Florry Dawson, punching Mrs. Smith in the stomach, "he doesn't want you, he wants me. Why don't you bugger off and leave us alone."

"Doesn't want me? Doesn't want me?" Mrs. Smith screamed, "what the bloody 'ell do you think this big belly is if 'e doesn't want me?"

"I'll fix your belly for you, bugger you," screamed Florry Dawson while Mrs. Smith hung on to Florry Dawson's hair and pulled it so hard a large chunk of it came out in her hand.

"I'll murder you *and* your brat," Florry Dawson screamed, kicking Mrs. Smith in the belly. Mrs. Smith clutched her stomach.

"Ow, ow," she screamed. "You bloody cow, sodding bitch," and kicked Florry in the behind.

I could hardly breathe I was so excited. I was enjoying the fight but I was scared, too. Then Florry trod on my foot with her spiky heel and I screamed.

"Mind the child," Mummy shouted.

Some of the men, even Daddy holding his razor, rushed in from the men's side to see what was going on. Then in rushed Mr.

Smith. A huge brute, he shoved the men aside and said, "Ere, wot's going on?" He took both of the women, his wife and Florry Dawson each by one ear and dragged them screaming and kicking out into the street.

Mrs. Crown had caught sight of Florry and the Smiths in the mirror and had stood up. "Well, I never," she said in a shocked voice. "Did you ever 'ear such carryings on?"

"I'm burning," screamed Mrs. Lyons. Her curlers were smoking.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry," Mummy cried out and turned off the electricity. She pulled off the curlers. A few of Mrs. Lyons's curls came off her head in Mummy's hand.

"Don't worry, love," said Mrs. Lyons, "it weren't your fault. It's them new people moving into the neighborhood. Got no class. Ain't like the old days when people was respecable."

"Thank you so much for understanding," Mummy said. Her face was white, tears trembled on her lashes, her hands shook. "I won't charge you," she said. "I mean, no need to do the floors."

The men all went back to their side of the curtain laughing and joking about 'females.' Dad went back to his customer.

I was breathing hard, still clutching a bunch of kerby grips in my hand. Slowly I unclenched my fist and put them away.

Mummy took off Mrs. Crown's metal wave-makers and the pin curls, combed her hair into waves and curls, then rubbed a little vaseline between her hands and smoothed it over Mrs. Crown's hair

to make it shiny.

"Bootiful," Mrs. Crown said as she primped in the mirror.

Mummy turned to Mrs. Lyons and took off the permanent wave curlers. Normally, Mrs. Lyons would scrub the shop floor 3 times in exchange for the perm. Not this time.

"My Gawd, I hope that Mrs. Smith's baby isn't hurt, that rotten Florry kicking her in the belly." I hoped the kick wouldn't make Mrs. Smith have a hunchbacked baby.

Mrs. Lyons looked a little tubby in front. I wondered if she was having another baby. That would make seven girls if she *was* pregnant. Suppose she had a boy? One boy among all those girls. He'd be spoiled to death, I thought. Lucky kid.

After the shop was closed, Daddy rubbed Mummy's swollen ankles. "Aaah," she groaned, "that's so good." They both combed their hair with a tooth comb for lice. They turned on the wireless. Ted Heath led his band in a fox-trot. I did a little dance by myself in the kitchen.

Mummy spoke sternly to me. "You're flinging your hips around, eating all kinds of *chazerai*, unkosher food. You're getting to be like a gentile. You need to be in a Jewish place in the country," Mummy said. Mummy didn't care about me being Jewish. I understood only too well. I interfered with her social life. She wanted me gone again.

"There's a very nice hostel in Great Chesterford," Mummy

said. "You'll like it there, and you'll be out of the bombing."

For the third time in my life, I was about to enter an orphanage, this one for Jewish refugee children. They'd fled the Nazis on the Kindertransport, coming from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania and France. Britain allowed 10,000 refugee children fourteen and under into the country. Now I'd have not one or two but forty foster sisters and brothers. Mummy said I'd be the oldest child there. And I'd not only be the oldest, but also the only British-born child among dozens of foreigners. Once more I'd be a stranger.

Chapter 13

The White House

There was new hope in England. Germany had made a big mistake in invading Russia in the summer of 1941 and, German troops, mired in the bitter Russian winter, short of supplies, were suffering. The Japanese, too, had made the mistake of bombing Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 and America finally entered the war. So we had two new allies and one less enemy to fight. Since 1942 The Royal Air Force by day and the American Eight Air Force by night, were bombing Germany knocking out crucial German production centers and devastating the country and people.

In October of 1942 the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery finally beat back Rommel in Tripoli and southern Tunisia. This was the turning point of the war. In November of 1942 General Eisenhower commanded an Allied force which landed on the coast of Algeria and Morocco, taking the Germans by surprise and freeing up supplies of oil to the Allies. By February of 1943 German soldiers were surrendering in Stalingrad. In August of 1943 the Allies took Sicily and used this as a springboard to invade Italy in September of that year. Italy then declared war on Germany, its former ally.

Early in 1943 President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met in Casablanca and announced that the Allies would accept nothing but unconditional surrender from the Axis. The

bombing of London tapered off to almost nothing and evacuees were pouring back to their homes. I was going the opposite way.

In the late summer of 1943 once again I found myself at Liverpool Street station, shunted against my will on to a train, by Mummy. There were the same enormous trains puffing in and out, waiting to steal me away to places unknown.

"Look, there's evacuees getting off the trains coming home to London," I said to Mummy as I dragged my feet through the station archway. "The Allies are winning the war. Why are you sending me away again?"

"You'll be among our people at the refugee hostel."

"I'm not a refugee, Mummy. I was *born* in England, like you."

"You'll go where I tell you."

After two hours, passing stops with strange names like Bishops Stortford, Audley End and Stansted, we came to a tiny station called Great Chesterford. We stepped off the train. The black rump of the train, looking like Queen Victoria's backside, waddled away toward Cambridge, a real and interesting town, not like this speck of a village.

A tall, skinny stationmaster stood scratching his red neck while reading a newspaper. He looked exactly the same as the stationmaster we'd come across when we first arrived in Ely. No one else was in sight.

"Can you tell us the way to the White House?" Mummy asked. This was different from when I'd been five. Now that I was

fourteen, I knew how to get back home but I didn't have the means and I thought I never would. I still felt like Gretel dropped off in the middle of nowhere, soon to be deserted by my mother.

The stationmaster looked up from his newspaper. As we drew closer I read the headlines: "RUSSIANS WHIP GERMANS," "THE ALLIES HAVE LANDED IN ITALY," and, "EVACUEES POURING BACK TO LONDON BY THE THOUSANDS."

Once again the stationmaster gave us directions in a country accent, once again his Adam's apple bobbed, once again he put his bicycle clips around his trouser cuffs, cocked his leg over his bicycle like a hound about to urinate, and cycled off. He could have been the brother of the stationmaster at Ely. Or perhaps there was a model stationmaster at every country town station and they all looked and behaved the same.

The train tracks back to London stretched like lines of liquorice. Miles of black telephone wire sliced the white sky. Now the deserted station was totally silent and empty.

There was no bus or taxi from the train, so we walked to the hostel. Although it was only September, there was a cool nip in the country air. I turned up the velvet collar of my navy wool coat. England lay peaceful and green for miles around.

"You'd never know there was a war on," Mummy said as we panted along the rough gravel path, me schlepping my suitcase.

"Well there *has* been one for four years. Four years of evacuation, rationing, blackouts, and searchlights. And four

years of foster parents," I snapped.

"And bombing. You should be grateful you didn't have to go through the blitz, the way I did." Mummy said. "You should be glad I sent you away."

"Thank you," I said.

"You wouldn't have been happy in London."

"I love London," I said. "I hate the country."

In the distance I could see softly undulating green hills, crested by light mist and pretty white farmhouses tucked into the valleys of little farms. Slow-moving horses, sheep and cows grazed in the fields. I thought angrily that everything was slow and silent in the country. I longed for sooty, exciting London full of shops, trams, cafes, open air markets, music, and caustic London humor.

We came to the medieval gray stone church the station master had mentioned. I grudgingly liked its rough, uneven stones and blunt, square crenelations. Unlike Ely Cathedral, this church didn't loom smooth and sophisticated, blocking out all light, nor tower over and follow me wherever I went.

As we passed a row of ancient stone cottages, a lace curtain twitched in one window, an aspidistra quivered in another, while a black Persian cat stared green-eyed from a third. There was only one shop in the village--closed--with a rake, galoshes, a straw hat, and a sack of potatoes in the window. There was a small lone pub called, "The Greyhound," its

green bottle-glass windows looking like something out of a Dicken's story. A painting of the dog swung from a sign hanging on the wall.

Soon after the pub, we came to a beautiful big white stone house with a dark brown, ark-shaped roof. The house looked like a lady in a snow-white gown with sleek dark hair. Over the shiny red door was written, "The White House." Though the house looked warm and inviting, I dreaded meeting yet another set of strangers.

Mummy pulled the bell rope. In the silence we could hear the bell jangling inside.

I worried about the Warden and his wife. Would they be cold like the orphanage warden of my childhood or the many foster parents I'd been evacuated to? What would these refugee children be like? I'd only known three refugees, Zalman, Blanche and Ilona. They'd all been so sad. Would these children be sad as well? Would they accept an English girl? Before I had worried about gentiles accepting me. Now, I worried the same thing about Jewish refugees.

The door was opened by a petite woman of about thirty-five with a heart-shaped face, dimples, large dark eyes and plucked, arched eyebrows. Her long black hair was fashionably flipped up all around at the bottom. A blue, belted shirt-dress emphasized her trim waist. From behind her skirts peeped out a tiny boy with a mop of black curls and huge brown eyes.

"I'm Mrs. Shapiro, do come in," she said, smiling warmly.

"You're so kind," Mummy said.

Mother pushed her sharp fingernail into my back. I turned and stared at her and wriggled away. We stepped into a spacious, empty hallway. A fire in the wall opposite the front door burned brightly. I'd never seen a fireplace in an entrance hall. The empty hall and the flashing fire reminded me of the palace in *Beauty and the Beast*. They seemed to welcome me. Though no Beast appeared, I soon realized we were not alone in the hall.

Two doors on either side of the hall fireplace stood slightly ajar. From each of these the faces of small boys and girls peeked out, some timid with wide eyes, some solemn, some smiling mischievously, eyes darting to and fro. They looked like little goblins. Their eyes seemed too innocent to have witnessed any horror. Yet Mummy had told me that all these children's parents were missing or had been killed by the Nazis.

Near the front door, a graceful staircase with a polished bannister curved upward to a balcony that ran all along the second floor. Older children leaned over the balcony rail staring at us as if Mummy and I were on a stage and they were our friendly audience.

I liked these curious imps. They seemed to have come from the fairy tales I loved so much.

"Let's go into the study, meet my husband, and have a cup of tea," Mrs. Shapiro said to both of us. "Come, Stanley," she said

to her little boy.

I didn't like studies or wardens. They reminded me of the Chingford orphanage where the frosty warden--I never knew his name--had received me and told Mummy, "Short goodbyes are best. Goodbye, Mrs. Moss," and my mother had left me alone with the pink-faced stranger.

Mrs. Shapiro opened a polished oak door. This study had warm oak-panelled walls and was filled with light from a huge bay window, which stretched almost the width of the room. I could see a terrace and garden outside the French windows. A man in his mid-thirties sat in an armchair by the window. He was immersed in a book and puffing on a pipe. The aroma from the pipe smelled like wood and leaves burning in a forest and was most pleasant. When he rose I saw that his thin, pale face was severe, his eyes deep brown and intense behind tortoiseshell glasses. Smoke from the pipe curled up to the ceiling.

"This is my husband, Aaron Shapiro," Mrs. Shapiro said. She looked at him with such a melting smile, I would have thought she was flirting with him. I'd never seen my parents flirt with each other. Stanley ran to his father.

"How do you do, please sit down," Mr. Shapiro said with a slight, shy smile, shaking hands with Mummy.

Mummy pushed me toward a seat and sat opposite Mr. Shapiro.

Mr. Shapiro was tall with wide shoulders and a deep chest. His short hair fitted like a dark cap over his squarish head on

which sat a little black velvet *kipa* like the one Joseph Singer had worn. He sat with Stanley on his lap and spoke to Mummy mildly, his severe face softening.

"Was the train packed with troops? Did you have a seat?"

"It *was* packed...." Mummy began, when there was a soft knock on the door. A tall lady wearing a dark flowered dress sailed in bearing a tray of tea and biscuits. I was glad adults didn't wear uniforms here as they had at the orphanage.

"This is Mrs. Bramson, our cook," Mrs. Shapiro said.

Mrs. Bramson smiled to Mummy and me, handed round the tea and left, humming, "Waltzing, waltzing, high in the clouds," which I'd heard Deanna Durbin sing in a film.

"Mrs. Bramson was married to an American pilot in the Eighth Air Force. He was shot down and killed over Germany," Mrs. Shapiro explained. "She's not really a cook, she's just helping us out during the war. It's hard to get help with all the young women in the services or the Land Army."

"I'm so sorry to hear about Mrs. Bramson's husband," Mummy murmured while sipping her tea. I sipped mine, still feeling tense. Everyone seemed pleasant enough, but soon Mummy would leave and I'd be alone among strangers again. For the first time during the war, though, I'd be living with Jewish strangers. I wouldn't have to worry about any Elsie Lupsons rummaging in my hair for horns.

Also for the first time, our welcome had been warm and

friendly. Mrs. Shapiro seemed pleasant and motherly. The adults here wouldn't ignore me or leave me to wander the streets at night, I thought. In fact I probably couldn't leave the house after supper and I felt good about that. My tense shoulder muscles relaxed.

There was another knock at the door and a young woman of about twenty-four entered. I stiffened at the sight of her nurse's uniform. She was not tall, thin and grim like Sister from the Chingford orphanage but small and plump with shiny brown eyes, and her black hair was thick and glossy against her creamy skin. Her blue uniform with its white apron didn't crackle coldly as had Sister's but sat softly on her small, round body. The sun coming through the window caught the sparkle of an engagement ring on her finger. She smiled warmly at us.

"This is Nurse Rita," Mrs. Shapiro said.

"How do you do?" Nurse said with a strong German accent, shaking Mummy's hand with her own small one. "Hallo," she said to me. I supposed she was a grownup refugee working at the hostel.

I smiled at Nurse. It was nice to meet the staff personally and by name. I'd never known Sister's name.

"Now you've met our entire staff," Mrs. Shapiro said.

"How do you manage to keep the place so clean?" Mummy asked.

"The children all have *toranut*, duties," Mr. Shapiro said. "Everyone makes their own bed and keeps the bedroom clean, sets and clears the tables, washes and dries the dishes and peels

potatoes. Every day two of the older girls fetch fresh milk from the dairy. You, Gilda, will be traveling by train to high school in Bishops Stortford with Selma, Cookie and Helga, so you'll all be exempt from these duties. But you'll have full duties during the school holidays," he said and for a moment he looked severe.

"I'll be glad to help," I said quickly.

"The other children here all go to the local elementary school in Great Chesterford. When you come home from school you'll have Hebrew lessons with them. If you need it, I'll help you with your homework in the evenings." I was astonished. No one had ever offered to help me with my homework before.

"That's wonderful," I said. "I'm really worried, with Matriculation coming up. I have a big problem with math."

"We have a year to prepare," Mr. Shapiro said calmly.

"Thank you so much," I said, gratefully.

As we sat drinking tea in Mr. Shapiro's warm study, I felt for the first time, as if I had been welcomed into a family.

"Come, I'll show you the big girls' room and introduce you to Selma, Cookie and Helga," Mrs. Shapiro said, springing up. "Stay with Daddy, Stanley," she said to her little boy.

"I'd better catch my train," Mummy said hastily, also rising and setting her cup down on the desk. "Thank you so much for the tea," she said smiling in the charming way she had with strangers. She kissed me on the cheek with her violet-scented mouth.

"Here's a pound for pocket money," Mummy said. "Be good."

I took the crackly pound, but there was no pleasure in it. Just before leaving, Mummy always gave me money, as if to say, "You're a nuisance at home. Here's money, go away and be quiet."

"I'll take you to the door," Nurse said to Mummy. I followed.

Just before she disappeared around the corner, Mummy turned round and waved goodbye with her white lacy hanky. I could still smell her violet scented breath. Tears came to my eyes, but I swallowed them. There'd been so many goodbyes with Mother. I was a big girl now, though, the oldest girl in the hostel. I mustn't let the others see me cry.

Chapter 14

The Girls of the White House

"Come," said Mrs. Shapiro, taking my hand. She led the way up along the curving bannister, "This house is 400 years old, it's an historic monument," she said, smiling at me.

"I love the house," I said as I smiled back.

"So do we," she said.

The kids on the balcony were still watching us as we came up the curved stairs. Some squatted on the floor and peered through the bars like monkeys, calling out to me, "What's your name?"

"Gilda, what's yours?" I asked, and they called out, "Ina," "Joey," "Eva," with foreign accents. Once again I was the outsider, the only English girl among European children, the only non-refugee among refugees. Among forty orphans, I alone could claim both parents, four grandparents, three aunts and five uncles all but Uncle Max in the army, living a few hours or a telephone call away.

At the top of the grand staircase, we started up a second tiny flight of stairs to the attic. I loved the mystery of staircases. Where would they lead, what would they reveal when you came to the top? At rich Aunt Fanny's house these small stairs would lead to the servants' quarters in the attic. From behind the half-open door I could hear the lively chatter of girls. Mrs. Shapiro knocked. We went in.

The room was large, sun-flooded with plain wooden floors.

Six narrow army cots without mattresses were lined up against the far wall, about two feet apart. Each cot was covered with a dazzling white sheet neatly turned down over a rough khaki army blanket. A crisp white pillow topped each bed.

"Hello, girls, this is Gilda," Mrs. Shapiro said.

"I'm Selma," said a tall girl rising lazily from her cot. She wore a close-fitting sweater which showed off her full breasts and small waist. Her short school skirt revealed slim hips and long, slender legs. She shook hands with me as Europeans did. I assumed she was around thirteen.

"I'm Cookie," said a tall, lanky, flat-chested blonde of about twelve, rising from the window seat overlooking the garden.

"And I'm Helga," whispered the last girl.

Helga was smaller than the other two, with long frizzy hair parted in the middle and a longish freckled nose. Gray eyes peeped out shyly through her hair. I mentally nicknamed her "Mouse." She seemed to be about eleven, the first form in high school.

"Girls, show Gilda where to put her things. I have to help with dinner," Mrs. Shapiro said. I heard her running downstairs.

Selma was taller than me, about five foot four inches. She had the heavy, sexy eyelids that I'd always envied in women, and sleepy brown eyes. Long brown hair fell over her face like Veronica Lake's.

"You'll be zleeping next to me," she drawled. "Put your

clothes here."

There was one wooden wardrobe for all of us and we each had one drawer in an old creaky chest. There was no mirror.

We didn't need much wardrobe space. We'd wear only school uniforms during the week and none of us had much clothing anyway. The girls helped me put away my few clothes, stroking my Jaeger cardigan, tweed skirts and two wool dresses. "How soft," murmured Selma.

Cookie jumped off her bed and said, "I'll show you round the garden after supper." She rolled her rrs, something I as an English girl couldn't do no matter how hard I tried.

Cookie was as tall as Selma, but whereas Selma was dark, curvy and languid, Cookie was blonde, flat, and awkward. Her long limbs never stopped moving. I was afraid she would poke me in the ribs with her sharp elbows. Her constant jiggling and twitching reminded me of Millie Lightman and her St. Vitus' Dance.

"Look out for Cookie," Selma said, "she's a prankster."

"Rubbish," Cookie said. She looked down her high-bridged nose. "I hate being bored so sometimes I liven things up a bit."

"Oh, of course," Selma said with a slow, cynical smile.

"Where are you from?" I asked them.

"We're from Germany," Selma said.

"I'm from *Berlin*," Cookie said, as if to say, "Top *that*."

What a show off, I thought. I liked Selma and Helga better.

"You're the only English girl here," Helga said shyly, "Have you lived in a boarding school like all English girls?"

"Not exactly," I said laughing, thinking of my East End upbringing, summers with Mrs. Lyons, Mrs. One-Tit Major, Aunt Ellen, and all my assorted foster mothers and fathers during evacuation. "Boarding school is only for rich Christian girls. I don't know one Jewish girl who went to boarding school."

"I do wish we could live in an English boarding school, it sounds wonderful," Helga said wistfully. "I've read so many books and comics about their midnight feasts and sports and prefects and head girls. Perhaps you'd be our head girl?"

"Don't be so stupid, Helga," Cookie said.

I laughed. "Just because I'm British doesn't mean I know anything about boarding schools or being a head girl."

"Suppertime," called a girl who came running into the room.

"This is Marta Yellinek," Selma said. "She was in the Czechoslovakian ballet corps. When the Nazis came she was hidden by nuns until she could escape."

"Hello," Marta said, appraising me without a smile.

I stared at her. She was beautiful with a small perfect head and breasts, and the long, strong arms and legs of a ballerina. Although probably only twelve, she had the poise of a young woman of twenty. She looked like a Degas sculpture of a ballerina Daddy had shown me at the Art Museum.

We clattered down the wooden attic stairs and joined the

stream of smaller children who ranged in age from about four to eleven. None of the boys was older than eight and, like Mr. Shapiro, they all wore the small velvet kipa on their heads.

I followed Selma, Cookie and Helga to the kitchen which had two sinks and one long table.

"Two sinks? What for?" I said.

"One is for meat dishes, the other for dairy. We don't mix them," Selma said. It's forbidden in the Torah to cook an animal in its mother's milk. This is why we don't mix meat and milk foods or dishes. We also wait three hours after eating meat before we eat any food with milk in it."

"I like that idea. It's so compassionate, to avoid cooking an animal in its own mother's milk," I said.

My friend Moira had first introduced me to some Jewish customs like eating only kosher meat and spending one day a year fasting. I'd liked Moira's seriousness, the way she stuck to her principles, like doing without bacon even in wartime when food was scarce, because it was, by Jewish law, wrong to eat it. I'd admired her intense devotion when she prayed on Yom Kippur. It was Joseph Singer's passionate praying, he seemed to be trying to speak to God, personally, which had first attracted me to him. Moira had prayed the same way.

Now Selma had picked me up from where Moira left off. Since we lived together and the entire environment was Jewish she quietly explained each religious act and showed me how to carry

out each step so that I could, if I wanted, become observant like the rest of the hostel.

I was fascinated with the Jewish practices Selma described to me. Then she demonstrated each so I was able to participate in them with some understanding, not just by copying her.I enjoyed the idea of belonging to a group which believed strongly in a God who was strict but kind to animals and people and was eager to learn more about it.

Selma led the way to the kitchen sink.

"We eat in here? It doesn't look big enough for everyone."

"We just wash our hands in here," Selma said.

Selma filled a strange silver cup with two handles on it with water. She poured water on each hand three times.

"I washed before coming, must I wash again?" I asked.

"We're already clean. This is for a blessing over bread."

As she dried her hands on a towel she said, "Blessed are you, Lord God, who has made us holy with his commandments and has commanded us to wash our hands." She repeated the prayer in Hebrew. She filled the cup for me and I followed suit, except I didn't know the blessing in Hebrew. At least I didn't remember the little I'd learned before I was sent to the orphanage. All the children washed the same way, and each filled the cup with water for the next child. Everyone knew the blessing in Hebrew. I hoped I'd soon learn it.

"What does it mean 'made us holy'. . ." I started to say,

but Selma put her finger to her lips.

I followed Selma, Cookie, and Helga into a room behind the entrance hallway with two long tables set in an L-shape. I was glad we had chairs here and not benches as in the orphanage. No one could walk behind us and hit our unprotected backs.

Mr. and Mrs. Shapiro sat in the center of the longer table. Stanley stood, resting his chin and tousled hair on the edge of the table. Selma led the way to the other table and pointed to a seat at the head of the "L." She sat beside me and smiled at me. I felt happy we were going to be friends.

Mr. Shapiro shook salt onto a piece of bread, said what sounded like a blessing in Hebrew, and ate some. All the children followed suit. Then everyone started to speak at once.

"What did everyone say before they ate bread?" I asked Selma.

"Blessed are you, God, who brings forth bread from the earth."

"Why didn't anyone speak until they'd said this blessing?"

"Between the blessing over washing the hands and the blessing over the bread, we don't speak. There must be no distraction between the two holy acts. All of our actions are holy."

"All our actions are holy? What does that mean?" I asked.

"Sshhh, Mr. Shapiro is going to read to us," Selma said.

"I'll continue reading to you from Dickens's *Little Dorrit*,"

Mr. Shapiro said. I was delighted by his soft voice as he read to us. I could see that I was learning every minute I was with him. While he read, children brought in steaming platters of fried fish, potatoes and brussels sprouts. We took food and passed the platters around the table. In spite of the rationing, there was plenty of food. It seemed that the young children received extra rations.

Mr. Shapiro finally stopped reading so he could eat. Everyone talked as we ate. How different from Chingford. Among the Shapiros and all the children, I felt as if I were in a big family rather than in an institution. After eating, the entire group chanted a pleasant song in Hebrew, which Selma told me was thanks for the food. Another set of boys and girls cleared the tables and carried the dishes to the kitchen. We picked up our chairs and quietly placed them under the table, the way English children were taught.

"Come on, I'll show you the garden," Cookie said. The September weather was balmy with a slight nip in the air.

Cookie danced in front of me, not waiting for an answer, her heavy hair swinging from side to side like a curtain lashed by the wind. From the back lawn the white house gleamed, its square and bay windows outlined in a warm, brown paint. Smoke drifted from its tall, slim chimney pots.

"Follow me," Cookie called out.

I peered into the dining room windows where I could see

children in aprons clearing the tables. On the terrace outside Mr. Shapiro's study, some small girls hopped between chalked hopscotch lines. Two boys played gobs, others played marbles or leapfrog. Some played conkers.

This beautiful house had been occupied once by a single family. I imagined them having breakfast on the terrace. A maid with a white cap low over her forehead and wearing a white frilly apron would bring it out to them on a tray. The toast would stand in a silver toast rack. I imagined myself in that family, drinking tea from a delicate fluted cup, planning a leisurely day.

"Shall we visit grandmama or shall we play tennis today?" I asked my imaginary mother in her white muslin frock.

"Darling, let's visit grandmama for tea," my imaginary mother said, stroking my hair. Mummy never called me darling.

I kissed her scented cheek, brushing against her long earring, making it swing. My imaginary mother hugged me. I slipped back to reality to join Cookie.

Cookie snapped small branches from the trees as we walked away from the house, ripping off green leaves, the sap spurting white blood, tearing and scattering the shreds over the ground.

"How long have you been here?" I asked her, casually.

"I came on the *Kindertransport* just before the war, in 1939," she said, "exactly four years ago. I was on the last boat out of Germany. England let some children in, but not my

parents. My father put me on the boat and kissed me goodbye. I didn't know if I'd ever see him again."

"D'you know where he is?" I couldn't help asking.

"He escaped to Hong Kong, my mother to Chile. They were lucky. My grandparents, uncles and aunt weren't lucky," she said.

A few children ran back and forth across the little bridge over the pond, throwing bread to fat goldfish. Their heads bobbed up as they gobbled food. Cookie sat beside the pond.

"Do Selma and Helga know where their parents are?" I asked,

"Selma doesn't. Helga's parents are in Bergen-Belsen, it's a concentration camp." She turned to me. "Stop asking questions," she said abruptly.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't realize. . ."

"No, you wouldn't would you, English girl," Cookie spat.

Two boys ran at each other. "I'm a Spitfire, I'm going to get you, you lousy German Junker."

"Ack ack ack," they screamed, circling each other, arms out.

I turned, a little hurt, and walking backward, looked at the White House. With its pointed roof and tall chimney pots, it looked a little like an enchanted forest house in a fairy tale. In the dusk, it seemed to shimmer. All the windows outlined in brown paint stood out clearly against the white house like kindly, wise eyes, protecting us.

"Here's the orchard," Cookie said, dancing ahead of me. I

caught flashes of her white blouse through the dense foliage. I'd never seen apples, pears and plums growing on trees. A deliciously soft scent of apples filled the air.

We'd had almost no fruit since the war began. Could I just reach up and, like magic, pluck an apple or a pear? Or would the Beast come roaring out and take me to his palace? I stood under a pear tree leaning against the solid trunk, my face hidden by thick, cool leaves.

Cookie had become invisible.

"Coo-ee, can you find me?" I heard her voice. "Up here," she laughed. Looking up I saw her lying like a snake along a low branch covered with thick foliage.

"Want to come up? Here, I'll give you a hand," she said.

I put my hand up to hers. She clasped it with large, bony fingers. I put both feet on the trunk of the tree. Cookie began to pull me up. Then, with a raucous laugh, she let go of me and I thumped onto the hard ground.

"Ouch," I said, rubbing my back. Cookie laughed harshly.

Selma had warned me.

From the ground I looked back at the house. Far away I could see Selma and Helga passing back and forth in front of the big girls' bay window on the third floor. Dusk was falling. Soon it would be time for blackout. As the red sun set, someone drew all the blackout curtains except in the big girls' room where there was none. The lights just went out. But for the cold moon, the

house was now dark. Pale searchlights had come up, crisscrossing each other, and I heard the faint boom of distant gunfire.

The garden was quite silent, empty and dark, except for the searchlights. They'd followed me from London, to Newmarket, Ely, and now Great Chesterford, reminding me that even in this quiet hamlet we were at war. Overhead a group of Spitfires escorting Hurricanes roared East on their way to bomb Germany. I imagined the young men sitting tense in the cockpits. When Cookie and I went in through the kitchen, all the small children had gone to bed. It was about eight o'clock and blissfully quiet.

Two girls of about eleven were still washing and drying dishes, singing together, "All Through the Night."

"I can sing a descant to that," I said to the dark girl with her arms deep in suds. She had upturned Asiatic eyes, a small nose, thick round glasses and a full mouth. The Ugly Duckling. One day she'd be beautiful, I thought.

"Okay, we'll begin again," she said. "I'm Paula Korn."

As she sang the lullaby in a low voice, my voice soared with the descant Miss Senior had taught us. Like Mummy, who loved opera, I had a good voice. So did Paula. I sang passionately, with gratitude in my heart that I'd come to this warm place where there was even music.

Some older girls drifted in to listen to us, and little by little their voices joined ours. My voice was strong enough to

rise high over theirs with the descant. We sang flushed and delirious with joy, eyes shining, ending on a hushed note.

"That was beautiful, Gilda," Paula said.

I'd always wanted to be part of a large family. And here, unlike at the orphanage and among foster parents, the adults and girls actually spoke to me, and called me by my name. I wanted to live at home, but if I had to be away from London, this place was as good, perhaps better than home.

For the first time in my life, I felt in harmony with people.

15

Mr. Shapiro

"It's eight o'clock. There's an hour before bedtime. Let's go into the Green Room. It's for the big girls only, those of us over twelve. Bring your knitting," Selma said.

I was curious about the Green Room. I hadn't seen it before. I liked the idea of us big girls having a room to ourselves. It made me feel important. It was like being part of a club.

I fetched my knitting from the bedroom. The Green Room was behind the kitchen. As we entered I saw that the walls and rickety wooden cabinets were all painted apple green, not my favorite color. Its only furniture was a wooden table and six wooden chairs. It was small but cozy. Still, it was ours, where no little kids dared to tread.

Helga took a sewing box from one of the cabinets. She selected a glittering darning needle with a large eye, snipped a piece of wool from a ball, sucked the cut end to flatten it, and coaxed the wool through the eye. She put a wooden mushroom inside her beige lisle stocking and began to darn the hole. I knitted a pair of khaki socks on four clashing steel needles. Selma knitted a khaki scarf, already six foot long, for a very tall soldier. We were all knitting for the troops.

"Anyone want a sweet?" Cookie asked, offering some old ones from a cache in the cabinets. Each of us took one.

"Thanks, generous of you to share your sweet ration," I

said. "Speaking of sweet, Mr. Shapiro seems very nice. Is he strict?"

"He has a fierce temper," Helga said, biting off the end of the thread. "Once he caught my little brother stealing cheese, put him over his knees, and spanked him hard with his slipper."

I found it hard to imagine Mr. Shapiro spanking someone. He was so kind and gentle with me.

"Mrs. Shapiro's nice but she's so silly sometimes," Cookie said. She thinks about nothing except food and clothes. How could an intelligent man like Mr. Shapiro marry her?"

"Well, she's very pretty. I hear they met at a dance," Selma replied, needles clicking.

"I can't imagine Mr. Shapiro dancing," Helga said.

"I doubt he danced. He probably just went to look at the girls," I said, not telling them I'd been at such dances where the men just stood and stared at the women.

Nurse poked her dark head in the door. "Nine o'clock, time for bed."

We all put our work in the ugly green cabinets.

"I want to ask Mr. Shapiro a question," I said.

"I don't know if he'll like that, so late," Selma said.

"Well, Selma, you said all our actions are holy. I'm really curious what that means in Judaism. I have to understand it."

"He'd probably answer a question about religion," Selma said.

"Come in," he said, to my knock on the oak door.

He was sitting in his armchair, bathed in a pool of yellow light from a lamp beside him, reading Tacitus' *Agricola* in Latin, which I heard he'd taught himself. He puffed contentedly on his pipe. I loved the aromatic smell, the smoke wreathing his head, his nubby tweed jacket.

"I'm sorry to disturb you but may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly. Come in, sit down."

It felt wonderful, finally, to be able to talk to a grownup, and especially to a man. I'd never had a man to talk to, with my father deaf and myself cut off from Zada and my uncles.

"I heard something today I don't understand. Selma said all our actions are holy. But we're just ordinary people. What's holy about our actions?"

Mr. Shapiro smiled. His dark eyes gleamed. He put his pipe down on a little table next to him and looked at me.

"Do you know what the word *kodesh* means?" he said.

"No, I never heard the word until today," I said.

"The word *kodesh* has two meanings, holy and separate. The Jews' actions and, therefore the Jews, are holy if they try to keep God's commandments and emulate his personality. The ten commandments give us *some* guidelines: We worship only one Creator, no idols. Like God we rest on the Sabbath. We must not steal, kill, covet our neighbor's wife or property, lie in court,

dishonor our parents or oppress the stranger. God is mighty but compassionate, so we must try to be the same--to Jews and non-Jews. To emulate God is one definition of holy."

"And the other?"

"The second meaning of holy is `separate.' Jews have a mission in life."

"Isn't that exactly what gentiles accuse us of, of being separate, of being different?"

"Many groups of people are separate. Teachers are separate from students. Parents from children. The French from the Germans. The British from Americans. The Jews are separate because we have a specific task, a purpose."

I'd never known I belonged to a group at all, let alone to a group that had a purpose.

"What's our purpose?" I leaned forward.

Mr. Shapiro's velvety brown eyes stared into mine. I noticed a tiny spot of blood on the white of his left eye.

"Our purpose is to teach the world about the Torah," he said slowly. "Not by words, but by our actions. Every Jew is an example to others. If we ourselves practice Torah in everyday life, we show others what the Torah is."

"But people hate us for this. My grandparents told me stories about how the Poles and the Russians persecuted the Jews. That's why they left Poland and Russia. The Nazis and British Fascists hate us for being different."

"They hate us because we're the conscience of the world. Other nations don't like being confronted by a conscience, especially one belonging to such a tiny group of people."

I thought that the Jews of the world were like the pinprick of blood on the white of Mr. Shapiro's eye.

"Our message has always been unpopular: Stop doing evil. Do good. Follow the Torah. It's hard to be the world's conscience; it makes us the world's outsider. It's hard to be a Jew."

"It seems as if we're often the scapegoat of the world," I said.

"True. A new persecutor arises in every generation, but we will always survive them. However, we don't, like some religions, think it's noble to be a martyr. Life comes first above everything. If there's a conflict between breaking the Sabbath or saving a life, we break the Sabbath. If we have to fight on the Sabbath to save our lives, we fight. And we fight to live in Israel like our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David, King Solomon. To rebuild and live in Israel is also a holy act, a celebration of life."

Mr. Shapiro smiled.

"And now, it's getting late, we'll talk again."

Snuggled in bed in the dark, surrounded by friends I felt very happy. I now had a home, a group and a religion I belonged to, a Jewish identity and purpose. My purpose was to fulfill the

mitzvot, the laws commanded to the Jews by God. Just as I had been impressed by Moira and Selma's sincerity and belief, I might have an effect on others. I would change my way of life and join the ancient Jews and continue their practice of wise and just laws. I now felt I was a part of the whole world with direction and purpose, not a floating speck of dust without worth.

I looked out the window of the big girls' eyrie high into the sky. The stars stretched endlessly, millions of miles away, and I knew there were stars so far away we couldn't even see them. White clouds scudded across the heavens. We were spinning fast, but miraculously we didn't fall off the earth. Neither did the moon fall, but hung suspended in the skies. We spun so steadily that we didn't even feel it. Like a great vessel on a calm sea, we floated suspended in midair.

There was a universe with millions of parts which all worked together. And somewhere out there was God, who had created all these marvels. I was an infinitesimal part of this universe, but one with a promise to keep, to follow my ancestors' beliefs and practices. Suddenly I had not only friends and a family, but generations before me to whom I belonged. My heart was bursting with excitement and pleasure as I thought deeply about these new discoveries.

16

Storm and Blood

The next morning on our way out to catch the train, we passed Mr. Shapiro in the common room. He was teaching the younger children the *Cedra* of the week. Selma said this was the section of the *Chumash*, the Five Books of Moses, to be read during services on Shabbat. I still didn't know exactly what Shabbat was.

"Charley, read the Hebrew and translate," Mr. Shapiro said to a little boy of eight. I heard the boy's clear voice read the Hebrew and translate, "*Tsedek, tsedek*," Justice, justice," as we slammed out of the front door. I liked the idea of a religion which emphasized justice.

Outside, Marta and Paula were lugging the milk ration back from the dairy. Each held one handle of the heavy urn, leaning out, free arms stretched straight out, grunting.

"This milk urn is tearing my arm off," Marta grumbled.

"Sorry. Hello, goodbye," I said as we hurried past them. I felt guilty that the high school girls didn't do any heavy work in the hostel on weekdays. All our free time was given to study.

Selma, Cookie, Helga and I walked four abreast along the stony mile-long path to the station. Inside the fusty waiting room, a baldheaded man with a hooked nose sat on a wooden bench, warming his feet before the potbellied stove. He eyed me stonily.

"Another refugee? Hitler didn't kill enough of you Jews,"

he spat.

Selma's face paled. She bit her lip but said nothing. I was astonished. I didn't know what to say. The other two girls were silent, too. This was how it must have been for them in Germany, I thought. It was painful and puzzling to meet an Englishman who spouted the same poison as our enemies. True, there had been fascists in the East End before the war, but I'd naively thought fascism and anti-semitism in England died when the war began. Weren't we all fighting fascists and Nazis?

"How does he know I'm new?" I whispered to Selma.

"That's Mr. Storm. He's on the town council. They know everything about strangers."

The train chugged in. The old man with his hook nose and bitter face rose up and ran onto the train. We arrived at Bishops Stortford and split up. Cookie and I walked up a tree-lined street to our new school, the local Hertfordshire and Essex High School. Selma and Helga went to Skinners, another London school evacuated to Bishops Stortford. At my London school, Spitalfields, sixty percent of the girls there were Jewish. At Herts and Essex, Cookie and I were the only Jewish girls among 400 Christian girls.

These girls, all natives of Bishops Stortford, had probably known each other for a long time. The girls weren't hostile, but neither did they befriend us. This didn't worry me. I had plenty of friends at the hostel.

At lunchtime we were forced to go out no matter what the weather. Even in winter there was no heating in the school. When I washed my hands in the bathroom I discovered that the water was wonderfully hot. For minutes I let the hot water stream over my freezing hands. I thought of poor Selma who suffered from chilblains on her fingers. I knew it was wrong, wasting hot water in wartime. But warmed a little, I took my Hebrew book and sat outside on the cold ground, leaning against a wartime prefab school building.

A beautiful Indian girl with a black pigtail hanging below her waist ran past me, hockey stick on her shoulder, shouting in exquisite English, "Come on girls, let's beat them." She must be an upper class Indian, I thought, more English than the English.

I buried my head in my Hebrew book as if I didn't care about being left out. But I loved sports. I was an excellent shot at basketball and the best batter, runner and catcher at rounders.

"Why aren't you playing hockey with the rest of the girls?" the gym teacher asked me in passing.

"I get more from books," I mumbled.

I didn't want to tell her I hadn't been invited and didn't know how to just join the crowd. Instead of introducing me to the group, though, she went off looking puzzled. Fancy preferring books to hockey, she must have thought.

Scripture class followed lunch. Miss Blood, the Scripture teacher, was a large florid woman who dressed fashionably, though

in skin-tight clothing.

"Sit in the back and do your prep homework," Miss Blood told me, because I was Jewish and their lesson was about Christianity. I was to be quiet and not participate.

I had begun my homework when I was horrified to hear Miss Blood say to the class in a calm voice, "The Jews are hypocrites. They are the richest people in the world but they get their money by being dishonest, by being liars and cheats."

All the girls' heads swivelled round to look at me. I felt a flush creep up my neck and face, as if I were guilty. First the horrid old man in the waiting room and now Miss Blood had spouted anti-semitism. How could a teacher tell such lies? I was furious and confused.

I tried to catch Miss Blood's eye and plead for her to stop, but her eyes darted all over the room looking everywhere but at me. I was frantic. She continued with her poisonous words as if I was not there. The girls seemed to have no prejudice against Jews, yet Miss Blood was deliberately sowing the seeds of hatred in them.

After class the girls filed out. They avoided looking at me.

I lingered behind, unsure what to do or say.

"Would you prefer to go out of the class during Scripture lesson, Gilda?" Miss Blood asked me sweetly.

"No, it's quite interesting," I said, coolly. My courage returned as I thought what Mr. Shapiro might have said. "But

Miss Blood, are you aware that you are making the girls anti-Semitic by telling them that Jews are hypocrites, cheats and liars?"

"Oh," she said, eyes darting all over the room. "I think you *should* go out," she declared and swiftly walked through the door leaving me alone.

On the train home I told Selma, Cookie and Helga about Miss Blood and what had happened in Scripture class.

"It's bloody awful," Cookie said, "but we have to just sit and take it. At least they don't beat us up and kill us here."

Selma and Helga nodded in sympathy but said nothing. They felt lucky not to be beaten up for being Jews. They had barely escaped with their lives. But I was English born. I'd been brought up to hear everyone express his or her opinion and beliefs freely, Jews and fascists alike. I wasn't going to take this lying down.

"Mr. Shapiro will know what to do," I said stoutly.

When we reached the White House Mr. Shapiro gave us our Hebrew lesson on Ezekiel's vision. Although I was entranced by his vision I couldn't forget Miss Blood. After the lesson I asked to speak to him. The younger kids were getting ready for bed and the big girls were doing their homework in the Green Room. Doors were slamming, forty pairs of feet were stamping all over the house.

"Come in," he said holding the door open for me as if I was a lady. I loved being treated as an adult and not like a nuisance. His warm intimate study was a quiet haven for my tumultuous feelings.

"Mr. Shapiro, I'm very upset," I said.

"What's the matter?"

I told him about Miss Blood. "What can we do about it?" I asked.

I expected him to be outraged. I imagined him charging into the school on a white horse carrying a banner with a Star of David on it, the one the Germans called the "Badge of Shame" and forced Jew to wear. To me it was a badge of honor. Mr. Shapiro would ride into the classroom and deliver an impassioned speech to Miss Blood and to all the girls about the Jews' mission. Miss Blood would be so impressed with him she'd never again be anti-Semitic. The girls would offer their apologies and welcome me into their group.

"There's not much we *can* do," he said, puffing out a huge cloud of smoke. "We can only prove them wrong by our exemplary behavior. You must show them you are a proud yet humble Jew whose every action is holy, following the word of God."

"Is that all? I thought you might be able to speak to the teacher," I said in a small voice.

"Action speaks louder than words," he said. "Show the girls that you are above reproach and they'll respect you."

I lowered my eyes and bit my lip so as not to cry. I was ready to save the world and Mr. Shapiro said we couldn't do anything but be holy. It was too hard to be so good. I wanted to fight the way the Jews had fought the Fascists at Cable Street.

I had one more burning question I had to ask him. And as long as I had questions, I could bask in his presence.

"How is it possible for a people like the Germans with their civilization, their music and poetry, to want to murder every Jew and Gypsy? How can they play beautiful music with one hand and strangle us with the other? I don't understand," I said. " And why the Jews, always the Jews?"

"Culture is a very thin veneer on top of brutality. Beneath the civilized exterior lurks in every man and woman, great and small, the *yetse hara*, the evil inclination, to harm other men and women. This evil inclination is aroused easily. The only way to control the *yetse hara* is through morality. Culture is nothing without morality, knowing right from wrong, good from evil."

"How do we know what's good and what's evil?"

"Throughout the Torah God tells us the difference between right and wrong, good and evil."

The Torah forbade speaking evil against anyone. Miss Blood had told lies to young minds about the Jews. I realized then that my actions could show her and the girls that her accusations were unjust.

I thanked Mr. Shapiro for his advice.

"Goodnight, sleep well," Mr.Shapiro said.

"I'll try," I said, my admiration for him even greater.

I felt thankful to know someone as wise and kind as Mr. Shapiro. I admired the breadth of his learning, his knowledge of Torah and of secular subjects, the fact that he had taught himself Latin and shorthand. I was grateful for his willingness to answer all the questions I had about the world, about our people, our purpose. Like Moses leading the Jews into Israel, with Mr. Shapiro as my guide and mentor, I was learning to embrace my heritage.

17

Shabbat Evening

I closed the door to Mr. Shapiro's study and went upstairs to bed. The room was dark. All the girls except Selma were asleep.

"What did Mr. Shapiro say?" Selma whispered.

I told her about our conversation as I undressed. Laying my gym tunic, blouse and tie at the end of the bed, I slid into my corner cot. Hers was next to mine.

"I agree with him," she said. "We have to show your class that Miss Blood's accusation that Jews are liars and cheats is false. We have to convince them, by our moral behavior. Action speaks louder than words."

"What a day," I said. "First the anti-semitic man in the train station, then Miss Blood."

"Let's sleep now. Tomorrow's Friday. In the evening, thank God, it's Shabbat," Selma said sleepily.

"What exactly is this Shabbat?" I said. I knew Mummy lit candles for "Shabbos," but not what Shabbos meant.

I heard only Selma's steady breathing.

The next day in school, my classmates looked at me curiously. They didn't seem to hate me, though. I hoped they saw I wasn't the terrible creature Miss Blood had painted all Jews. I was banned from Scripture class, though, so I never heard her

lies again.

Only one girl, Doreen, befriended me.

"I like your red and green school colors," she said, as we left school under the brick arches that Friday afternoon. "Much more cheerful than our beige and brown."

"Thanks," I said, grateful one girl had spoken to me.

I wished I could buy the uniform of Herts and Essex High school, so the red and green Spitalfield colors wouldn't make me stand out so clearly as a stranger. But because I still belonged to Spitalfields, and would attend it after the war, I had to wear my London high school uniform.

"See you Monday," she said, with a wave goodbye.

I liked her because she wasn't always swinging a tennis racket or a hockey stick and like me, wore a secret touch of lipstick. It cheered me knowing that at least one girl in the class didn't believe Miss Blood, or if she did, didn't care.

On the train home, Selma prepared me for the Friday evening festivities at the hostel.

"We all take a bath Friday afternoon before Shabbat," Selma explained. "Since there's only one bath for over forty children, plus the staff, this takes hours. We're allowed ten minutes each."

"Only ten minutes?" I groaned. "You should have seen how we bathed in London. For an hour. Mummy and I used to go to the

public baths every Thursday."

As the train rattled home I told Selma about the public baths, the two huge buildings all made of marble. One had "Men" cut into the marble, the other, "Women." For only tuppence each, a bath lady gave us each two warm towels and a bar of soap, then led us down a hall with marble cubicles on either side. We went into our cubicle and locked the door. Each cubicle had a huge bath in it. The lady outside turned the spigot and sparkling hot water gushed in. Mummy tested it with her toe and would call out, "warmer," or "some cold please," then, "stop." The water came up to Mummy's breasts and up to my shoulders. I could lie down and even swim in it.

"Sounds wonderful," Selma murmured.

I wondered if she'd been rich in Germany and had a bath in her house. I'd heard that it was mainly the rich who escaped.

At the hostel we lined up for our baths. Cookie was taking hers. "Come out, you've been in there fifteen minutes," I shouted.

"Keep your hair on, I'm coming," she yelled back.

"Now you've made me long for a London bath," Selma laughed as Cookie flounced out of the door, head wrapped in a towel.

I followed Cookie into the bathroom. The rationed three inches of water was lukewarm and barely covered my behind. I lay down in it, wriggled around and turned on my tummy so all sides of me got wet. I soaped myself and washed my hair quickly with

shampoo that Mummy had sent me. The water ran out quickly.

I was outside the bathroom drying my hair when I heard Selma turn off the water. On impulse I bent down and peeked through the keyhole. There she sat, perfectly framed in the keyhole opening. Her beautiful face, long neck and slender bare shoulders stood out of the bath like a flower from a vase. She was looking up at the ceiling, smiling, eyes alight with pleasure.

What could she be thinking that gave her so much private joy? She was thirteen, a year younger than me, but didn't flirt with boys or men as I did. Already she summed up men on sight, as to whether they were husband material or not. All she wanted was to marry and have a home again. To me the hostel was home. To her, it was a waiting place until she had her own home. After watching her, I smiled and quietly tiptoed away. Whenever I took a bath after that I made sure to leave the key in the lock, so no one could spy on me.

Nurse, bustling around, had put clean clothes on each bed, even for the big girls, as if we couldn't choose our own clothes. Every day she decided what each child would wear. It was the only thing about her that I didn't like. For school we wore our uniforms. Now we dressed in our best and walked downstairs before dark. The searchlights, framed in the long windows beside the main staircase, were up, as usual, restlessly scouring the skies. Nurse dropped the blackout curtains over the staircase windows.

Selma and I went downstairs together, arms around each other. My hand fitted into the curve at her waist. I didn't have as much of a curve. She moved like a cat, one long leg in front of the other, a slight swing to her hips. Taller than I, she leaned down and sniffed my hair. "Mm, smells wonderful. What shampoo did you use?"

"Drene, I brought it from my mother's shop. Want some?"

"Really, can I have some for next week's hair wash?

"It's a promise." We reached the bottom step. "Is that roast chicken I smell? I'm starving."

"You don't know what starving is," Selma said. "Every Friday evening, we celebrate Shabbat. The house is cleaned from top to bottom, the silver polished, everyone bathes and dresses in their best clothes, then we stop all work and have a feast."

"I still don't understand," I said, a little embarrassed by my ignorance.

"Don't you know it's a Jewish holiday that comes every week?"

"My parents aren't religious and I've been living with Christian foster-parents for the last four years. I know all about *their* holidays," I said.

"Shabbat is the day God finished creation. He rested, so we rest and celebrate, like him. It's a holy day. You'll really enjoy it," Selma said.

"Why celebrate Shabbat Friday evening?"

"The Torah says after each day of creation, 'And it was evening and it was morning, one day,' so we begin all festivals in the evening and end them the following evening."

I watched Mrs. Shapiro strike a match and light three candles in gleaming silver candlesticks. The three flames spurted into the air. She covered her face with her hands and said, first in English then in Hebrew, "Blessed are you, Lord God who commanded us to light the Sabbath lights."

Lighting candles on Friday evening was the only religious thing Mummy practiced. After lighting the candles Mummy would sigh, then go into the shop and 'do' a set or a perm. I didn't know then that lighting the candles marked the beginning of Shabbat, nor that it was a day of rest. It was so routine I didn't think to ask and Mummy never explained.

"Why do we light candles Friday night?" I asked Mr. Shapiro. "Why three?"

"We light two for the parents and one for each child. The candle lights symbolize the light of Shabbat, of Torah, and of the day of rest. We're commanded to enjoy ourselves on Shabbat, to wear nice clothes, pray, learn Torah, sing, eat well and invite people who are alone. Hospitality to strangers is a first mitzvah or good deed. 'Because we were strangers in Egypt,' we know how it feels to be a stranger, alone."

Cookie covered her mouth with her hand and whispered in my ear, "And husbands and wives are *supposed* to make love tonight.

It's a *mitzvah*," she giggled. "Making love is holy."

"How can making love be holy?" I asked. Mummy once sighed and said "I hear that making love can be beautiful." I'd read in the women's magazines Mummy sent me that making love was wonderful, but I knew little else.

"Making love is the highest form of creation, since that's how children are created," Selma said. "So it's right that husband and wife make love on Shabbat. We are supposed to enjoy Shabbat. God wants husband and wife to enjoy each other on Shabbat more than any other day. It brings them closer together."

"All over the world religious men and women will make love tonight?" I whispered.

"If the woman has finished her period, waited seven days and been to the *mikveh*, the purification bath," Selma said.

"Goodness me," I said. "That's about two weeks to wait."

"They say it makes the couple more passionate," Selma said. "They have babies more easily. I want lots of babies."

"You seem to know a lot about it," I said.

"I'm only interested in getting married and having a family," Selma said. "That's why I've studied these laws and asked questions."

I wondered if she'd asked Mrs. Shapiro or Nurse such questions.

We went into the common room for a short service. During the

service I leafed through the prayer book. Right after the blessing of the lights, I came across the Song of Songs written by King Solomon. The first line began in Hebrew, "*Yishakoni minshikot pyhuu*," "Oh that he would kiss me with his lips!" I read quickly while the others prayed, "Indeed, your caresses are better than wine. Sweet is the fragrance of your perfumes; your very self is a precious perfume; therefore do the maidens love you."

I'd thought only women were supposed to smell beautiful. I'd never read a more passionate story of the love of a woman for a man. Why was it in a prayer book I wondered? Did I dare ask Mr. Shapiro about it?

When services finished, we shook hands, girls kissed each other on the cheek and said, "Shabbat Shalom," peace on the sabbath.

Then Mr. Shapiro put his hands on his son's curly head. He said in Hebrew, "May God bless you like Ephraim and Menasha," and then bent and kissed his child. How beautiful, I thought.

In the kitchen we washed our hands, again pouring water three times over each hand using the two handled cup.

"Friday night and Saturday, we pour water over the right hand first, then the left, to show this night is different from the other six days of the week. Then we say the blessing," Selma said.

I now knew the blessing for washing the hands and over

bread in Hebrew and knew not to speak until we'd eaten bread with salt. I felt happy when I said the blessings in Hebrew like all the other children. It was exciting to learn so many new things about Jewish knowledge and practice.

The dining room tables were set with gleaming white cloths. Two large, golden braided breads peeped out from under a white cover embroidered in blue silk with the Hebrew words, "Shabbat Shalom," Peace on the Sabbath. At the age of five I had learned to read some Hebrew in Talmud Torah, Hebrew school. Now it came back to me.

A bottle of red wine and a silver goblet stood in front of Mr. Shapiro's seat. A fire of rationed coal and coke danced bright red and blue, crackling, in the dining room fireplace. Forty pairs of bright eyes gazed at Mr. and Mrs. Shapiro.

"Mrs. Shapiro's penciled in her eyebrows, put on mascara and lipstick, and curled her hair," Cookie said. "Thinks she eighteen," she laughed.

"I wish I could dress up like that," I said. "When I'm sixteen if my mother lets me, I will. Stanley looks adorable in that velvet suit, like Little Lord Fauntleroy. I saw the film before I left London."

"You must tell me the story later," Selma said, and squeezed my hand. I loved having a best friend again.

Four Jewish soldiers, two American and two British, sat at

our table.

"Who are they?" I asked Selma. "Are they friends or relatives of the Shapiros?"

"Neither. The Shapiros always invite someone if they know they're alone."

"Ah, It's a *mitzvah*, a good deed," I said, happy to show that I had learned something.

"Pity those men are too old," Selma said.

"At least thirty," I whispered, "and probably married. When I marry and have my own home, I'm going to invite people who are alone, too," I told Selma.

"Not me. Even if it is a *mitzvah*. I just want to be alone with my hubby."

Mr. Shapiro stood, and all forty children followed his lead. He poured wine, made a blessing over the wine, drank a little, then gave some to his wife and son, who passed the cup to the guests. Each child took a sip and then passed the cup. Mr. Shapiro cut the big twisted breads into pieces, put salt on each piece, and passed the tray to everyone. This slightly sweet white bread was more like the cake we scarcely had during the war.

"Mm, good *challah*," Cookie said, stuffing her mouth. I would learn that she could eat like a horse and never put on an ounce. Selma picked at her food. She wanted to keep her willowy figure for her future husband, she'd told me. I had begun

an exercise class at the hostel and had a healthy appetite, so I ate with gusto.

Instead of the usual fish or vegetables, Mrs. Shapiro ladled out aromatic bowls of golden chicken soup and noodles. Steam from the tureen curled up to the ceiling.

Mrs. Shapiro handed Mr. Shapiro a plate of soup. He took it from her hand.

"You can see she's not *nide*, impure, or he wouldn't take it from her hand," Selma said. "Instead she'd put the plate on the table then he'd pick it up. But not everyone is as strict. Those soldiers wouldn't be, I bet."

We had a feast of roast chicken and potatoes and carrots, and real chocolate cake made from everyone's rations. Between courses brought in by kids on *toranut*--we all took turns on kitchen duty--we sang Hebrew songs about the pleasures of Shabbat, about learning Torah, and about when we Jews would return to live in Israel. I heard Mr. Shapiro speaking to the soldiers at the table.

"Antony Eden just announced that he loves Arabs and hates Jews. A boatload of Jewish refugees trying to get into Palestine was sunk right outside the port," Mr. Shapiro said, his voice trembling. "No country will let the Jews in. The British White Papers refuse entry to desperate Jews despite knowing that if they're sent back to Germany, they'll be murdered."

The soldiers answered him but I was too upset to listen.

I looked around at the calm children who had escaped the Nazi terror, sent away by parents, now mostly dead, and felt sad. At least everything here was calm and quiet. I looked forward to a day of rest every week: no school, no work, no worries.

I thought of home. Booba would have lit candles and would probably be serving Zada and my uncle Sam the same meal we were having. For the first time I realized that Booba and those in the Jewish East End closed their shops on Friday evening and Saturday because it was the Sabbath. I'd never known before that this was the reason.

In Bethnal Green, the gentile part of the East End, Daddy would now be sloshing his brush into the Queen Mary and King George shaving mug, shaving and cutting the men's hair, giving them hot towels for their big Friday evening in the pub. Some men would buy condoms. Mummy would be cutting, setting and perming women's hair.

I wondered why my grandparents, whom I vaguely knew were religious, had never invited me for Shabbat. They had never told me anything about our traditions nor taken me to synagogue. I wished my parents were religious. They scorned religion. If Mummy had known the hostel was religious, she might never have sent me here. Did she know that all the children here were refugees?

Looking around at all the young faces, I realized I was the only English Jew among them, perhaps the only one with grandparents. The Germans had probably murdered the entire

family of almost every child in the room.

After dinner, we sang the blessing over the meal. Our pure young voices seemed to float out of the windows, through the lacy black branches, across the searchlights, higher and higher past the moon and the sparkling stars all the way up to heaven. Was God really up there beyond the searchlights and the stars?

Looking at the glow of the candles and the cheerful fire on the children's faces, the white tablecloths, the silver goblet and sparkling wine, you'd never know there was a world war going on and that the evil Nazis ruled all of Europe except little Britain.

The big girls went upstairs to bed together, chatting quietly, undressing hurriedly in the cold dark. We had a beautiful view of the garden and sky from our great bay window, especially at night when the moon shone or by the light of the searchlights.

"It's so pleasant here on Shabbat," I said to Selma, stripping in the dark, laying my clothes at the end of the bed.

"It's even nicer on *yom tov*, on holydays," Cookie said, ripping off her clothes and throwing them on the floor. I could see only the dark silhouette of her body, straight as a boy's.

"Simchat Torah is coming up. On Simchat Torah, we dance like crazy to celebrate receiving the Torah. Even Mr. Shapiro dances."

"I can't wait to see *that*," I said.

"Of course *Yom Kippur* comes between Rosh Hashanah and Simchat Torah. Then we fast for twenty-four hours."

"I fasted all day once. It was easy," I said. "I like Yom Kippur. It reminds me of meeting Joseph Singer in the boys' refugee hostel in Ely."

"Who is Joseph Singer?" Selma asked,

"Yes, do tell," Cookie said quickly.

"He was a boy I was crazy about in Ely. I was evacuated there before I came here. I never actually met him. I only saw him on Yom Kippur at services." I told them about the letter I'd written him and how I'd been punished.

"That was more romantic than meeting him," Selma sighed.

"I imagine he's still in Ely at the boys' hostel. I'll never know if he saw my letter."

"What an idiot you were," Cookie said.

"What I went through for love," I said, mocking myself.

"You were so brave, I wouldn't have dared," Helga said.

"Oh, poo, just a letter, it was nothing," Marta said. "I'd have gone straight up to him and kissed him."

Selma, in her nightgown, walked gracefully over to the window seat, swung her long legs up on it and put her arms around her knees. She stared up at the winking stars. Her long hair fell below her narrow waist.

"I wish *I* could meet someone romantic," she said dreamily.

A formation of Hurricanes and Spitfires flew overhead, the

steady roar of their engines soothing. I joined Selma on the window seat, and we strained our eyes to see the planes' black hulks passing against the moonlit sky and the searchlights.

"I'm glad it's not one of those 'zoom-zoom-zoom-zoom' Messerschmidts," I whispered. "They make me so nervous."

"They've never dropped a bomb here, so far," Selma said. "A few Germans were shot down and parachuted near here, though."

"Really?" I whispered, "Germans have landed here?"

"Not to worry, they were taken prisoner of war, and were locked up. We're quite safe. In any case, Mr. Shapiro will protect you," Selma said with a laugh.

Had she seen my admiration for him? Had I looked silly?

The other girls had gone to sleep. Selma and I sat on the window seat facing each other. Selma's face was pale in the moonlight.

"I can't wait for this war to be over. I'm getting married as soon as I can," she said.

"Good gracious, you're only thirteen, Selma," I whispered.

"In three years I'll be sixteen. Why wait? You never know if you'll be able to later."

"Do you know where your parents are?" I asked.

She was silent for a full minute. She bent her head to her knees, and her hair fell over her face. The other girls' pale faces and white eyelids gleamed in the moonlight, still as death.

"I don't know," she said, her voice trembling. "It's

terrible not knowing. I almost don't want to know. I last saw them four years ago. They put me on the *Kindertransport* train for England in 1939. Oh how we cried and hung on to each other in the storm. We couldn't let go. My face was covered in rain and tears. I'll never forget my mother's face, wracked with grief. 'When will we ever meet again?' she cried. My father's hair had turned from black to white. His face, too, was white as he kissed me good-bye. A Nazi soldier tore us apart. I loved my Mutti and Papa with all my heart. I hope they're alive, but there's been no word for four years. The Red Cross can't find them. I'm afraid they're dead."

Unless I asked them directly, none of the children mentioned their parents. It was as if they'd blotted out their past. I was obsessed sometimes imagining it had been me who'd lived in Europe, only twenty miles away across the English Channel. Suppose my headstrong grandmother hadn't insisted on coming to England fifty years before? Suppose I'd been in Poland when Hitler conquered it?

I'd seen photos in the newspapers and newsreels of Germans beating and dragging old Jews and hungry little boys, arms raised in surrender, off to concentration camps. Suppose it had been *my* Booba and Zada and *my* parents who'd been murdered? Suppose I had been in Selma's place?

Tears streamed down Selma's face. Her whole body trembled. I sat beside her, turned her shoulders so that she leaned against

me. I put my arms around her, stroked her hair and lay her head on my shoulder, soon damp with her tears. I rocked her like a baby. I said what my Zada used to say to me, "*Sha bubbele, sha mine kindt*," be calm little doll, be calm my child.

The searchlights shone into the room, bathing Selma's face as she lifted it up. Her usually bored eyes, now glittering, frantically searched the stars and searchlights as if she might find her father or mother there.

Selma shivered in my arms. I felt horror as I imagined her mother and father shot, their bodies falling, red blood running into white snow. I then felt guilt and relief that no matter how lacking in love and understanding, I had parents and a whole family in London. I would be a sister to Selma. We would be family for each other.

"Why don't we both get in bed, we'll snuggle up together, keep each other warm?" I said.

We tiptoed, clinging to each other, over the cold wooden floor to Selma's bed. It was a tight squeeze. The cot was narrow, but we both fit. As we lay on our sides, face to face, I felt her soft breath against my cheek. Selma smelled faintly of the lavender sachets we put in our drawers.

"Pretend we just married and we're making love," Selma whispered, her face still wet, her breath warm on my cheek.

"How?"

"Like this," and Selma put her hand under my nightdress and

ran it up and down the naked sides of my body. I shivered. I felt pleasure but faint alarm as her hand drew near my breasts. My body trembled, but she stroked only my face, hair, shoulders and back. I felt relief and pleasure.

"Now do it to me," Selma whispered. "Pretend you're my husband." Now I felt anxious. What should I do? Was it wrong?

I gingerly slid my hand under her nightgown and touched her naked skin. It was surprisingly smooth and silky. I slowly stroked it. I tried to imagine I was a man and Selma was my bride and that it was our first night together. Since they never showed this part in the films, I was at a loss as to what happened next. It was pleasurable, a little exciting and forbidden. I wasn't sure why. Physical pleasure was a new experience. I bit my lip in the dark. I didn't want to seem like a country yokel not knowing what to do, so I made it up as I went along. I stroked Selma's cheek, her long hair which had fallen across my face. I ran my hands across her throat, shoulders, daringly, down to her small waist, over the rise of her hips and along the smooth sides of her thighs.

"Dearest, you're so beautiful," I whispered, because that was what they said in the films, "--all over," I added as an extra touch. I hoped I was playing my part well. "You're all mine."

"I wish that someone loved me more than anyone else in the world, and that we were married and he was my very own and that I

had my very own home," Selma whispered. "I so want my own home."

"You will be married in a very short time," I whispered. "You're so beautiful. I bet you'll be married at sixteen to a tall, dark and handsome man who'll be mad about you and you'll have a beautiful home and six lovely children."

"And we'll be friends forever, won't we?" Selma whispered.

"Forever," I said, my voice trembling.

We kissed each other and fell asleep.

Chapter 18

Shabbat Day

I dreamed that I ran silently, barefoot down the narrow attic stairs then down the curving main staircase and opened the back door. The garden shimmered green. Dewdrops glittered on the trees.

The garden was empty. Not a soul stirred. The ghosts of the children who had played there yesterday, Friday, skittered among the trees, their cries rang in my ears. The birds sang a huge, joyous chorus. I ran barefoot through the garden, feet wet in the drenching dew, over the little wooden bridge across the pond. I ran to the end of the long garden all the way to the orchard to meet my lover from Song of Songs. The golden sun just rising, warmed my face.

I stood in the orchard under a tree, its boughs bent, heavy with pears, each fruit fat, like a woman with child. My stomach lay round, waiting to bear its first fruit.

A mist rose from the ground wreathing my head in a white floating crown. My eyes multiplied and a hundred of them, glowing golden like a cat's, shone through the triangular green spaces between leaves and fruit. The thick mist parted and I looked up to see the blue sky, the sun shining warm on my head. My nightgown melted from my body and dropped around my feet. Naked, I stretched bare arms up to the sun like Eve standing in the Garden of Eden. The orchard trees bent down, pressed their fruit

into my breasts. The air was pure. I raised myself on tiptoe and plucked a ripe plum from the tree. The protesting leaves rustled. I pressed the tart flesh to my lips. The juice ran down my throat, staining my breasts purple like the garb of ancient royalty.

Suddenly I changed into an Israeli princess, robed in white. I ran between the trees, and a city appeared. I ran down the hills and came to the streets of Jerusalem calling to the watchmen, as in Song of Songs, "Have you seen my lover?"

His hands are as rods of gold
Set with Beryl
His body is polished ivory
Overlaid with sapphires.
His legs are as pillars of marble,
Set upon sockets of fine gold;

Suddenly in my dream this dazzling lover stood before me, his hair heavy with black curls from which hung sparkling dewdrops, but his face was hidden. His golden hands stretched out toward me. Blue sapphires glittered on his polished breast and wrists, and in a fringe at his loins. . . He turned his face to me.

"Time to get up," Selma murmured. "Shabbat Shalom," peace on the sabbath.

"Shabbat Shalom," I said, smiling at the wonderful dream I'd just had.

It was delightful to rise at eight instead of seven and not to rush to dress, cram breakfast in our mouths and rush for the

train. We dressed in our best clothes and went downstairs to the dining room.

We ate a leisurely Shabbat breakfast of homemade sour cream and rich red sliced tomatoes with coarse salt on thick, seeded rye bread, and the two ounce weekly butter ration. We drank strong hot tea with milk and sugar. Afterwards we had Shabbat morning service in the common room. Anita was the only one absent from the service.

Anita had just arrived at the hostel. She was the only other English-born Jewish girl there. Her family had been bombed out, and her parents had separated. Her mother had rented a room for herself and the new baby, but there was no space for Anita.

Anita had a Slavic face, wide and ruddy, with dark eyes and thick black hair. Doubtless her grandparents, like mine, had come from Russia. She was about my age, fourteen, but looked older. She was short, buxom, with breasts like a woman's, spoke roughly, and shouted like a peddler. Like me, she came from the East End, but from an even poorer part. Her father was a laborer, unusual for a Jewish man.

Anita hated the hostel. In fact she hated everything and everyone, but especially men. She had contempt for Mr. Shapiro which I found disturbing.

After breakfast everyone except Anita trooped into the common room for services. To my amazement the Hebrew I'd briefly learned at age five in Talmud Torah had all come back to me,

though I didn't yet understand all the meanings. The Hebrew was written on the right-hand page and there was an English translation of each page on the left. I enjoyed reading and turning the pages from right to left instead of from left to right. I learned the melodies for the prayers, which thanked God for this holy day of rest and fervently wished for the return of the Jews to the Promised Land.

Mr. Shapiro spoke briefly. He quoted God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15, "Unto your seed I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates."

"If Britain would let us in, we could join our brothers who have lived there for centuries and with bare hands we would join those who turn the eroded soil back into a green land flowing with milk and honey, as in ancient Israel.

"The Jews of Israel are divided as to whether to fight with the British against the Nazis until the war ends or to oust the British now," Mr. Shapiro said.

I resolved that when I was older I would go to Jerusalem and pray at the ancient Temple Wall. I'd work on the land and get the British out, return our country to the Jews as promised by God.

After services we shook hands. Some girls kissed, saying, "Good Shabbos." We washed and went into the dining room for lunch. Mr. Shapiro made the blessing over wine and bread. Mrs. Shapiro brought in a strange, new dish I'd never seen: *cholent*.

"How is it made?" I asked.

Mrs. Shapiro's face lit up as she explained, "First take a deep pan, and brown some onions in oil. Then brown cubes of beef in the oil and onions. Add one quartered potato for each person, then fill in the spaces between the meat and potatoes with *babylach*--you know, little white beans--and with barley. Sprinkle it with salt, garlic and pepper, barely cover the whole thing with hot water, cover it tightly and leave it on a very low light on the stove all night. In the morning, mm, scrumptious."

She bunched her fingers to her lips, and kissed them. "It's very good with our two ounce-a-week meat ration. The beans and barley fill the spaces between the meat."

I remembered when my Zada took me into the granary behind Booba's grocery shop and filled pound bags with little beans, *babylach*. Sometimes he'd blow up and burst a bag to make me laugh. Now he'd be doing that for my new baby cousin, Jeremy, Aunt Regina's child.

Between courses, forty children sang Hebrew songs and our voices sounded beautiful. While we ate, Mr. Shapiro read us a story from Sholom Aleichem. He then asked us each to sing a song or quote poetry. I sang *Shuvi Nafshi*, a song I'd sung in the orphanage.

"You have a lovely voice," Mr. Shapiro said.

I felt myself blush with pleasure. Anita sat sullenly throughout the meal but attacked her food as if starving.

"What wrong, Anita?" I said.

"All this mumbo jumbo," she said. "It's ridiculous."

After we sang the blessing and put the chairs under the table, Cookie said, "Mr. Shapiro's going to take his Shabbos afternoon nap but he'll soon come roaring out saying that he can't sleep."

"I can't imagine him roaring," I said astonished.

Mr. Shapiro went to nap in his study which faced the terrace where the children played hopscotch. Sure enough, he soon rushed out on to the terrace, hair standing on end, shirttails and *tsitsit* fringes hanging out, roaring, "I can't sleep, why can't you children be quiet?"

I was amazed that Mr. Shapiro had such a temper.

I wanted to let him have some peace, so I said, "Let's all go for a walk. Will you come with us, Nurse?"

I doubted they'd let us out all alone in the village.

"Sure," she said, springing up. "I'll just get my coat."

Like the Pied Piper I led all forty of them away. Selma and I walked together hand in hand. Marta, Cookie, Helga walked together. Anita walked alone. She dragged her feet like a tired old lady. The smaller children bumbled along happily. We rambled over the hills like forty raggle-taggle gypsies.

On our return, fresh and wind-blown, we came upon Mr. Shapiro in the dining room. He looked rested and was smiling. I was happy to see him calm again.

We had the traditional third meal of English Jews, cold fried fish, piles of bread and margarine and hot tea. Fruit from our orchard followed.

As we ate the third meal and darkness began to fall, Mr. Shapiro read us stories of famous rabbi scholars who secretly did good deeds for others. We took turns singing songs to the group until three stars appeared in the dark sky.

Mr. Shapiro said, "Time for *havdallah*."

Nurse drew the blackout curtains. Mr. Shapiro struck a match and lit a flat, colored braided candle.

"Here, Gilda. Hold it as high as you'd like your future husband to be," Mr. Shapiro said, smiling.

I held the candle high. Cookie giggled at me. Selma and Mrs. Shapiro smiled. The children's faces turned up to the high flame like flowers to the sun. The light was reflected in eighty innocent eyes.

"What's *Havdallah*?" I whispered to Selma.

"It's the ceremony dividing the Sabbath from weekdays."

Mr. Shapiro filled his silver cup with wine. He sang the prayer in Hebrew. By the light of the candle, I read the prayer that thanked God for this holy day of rest, for the division between holy and secular, sacred and profane, between the Sabbath day and weekdays. Mr. Shapiro raised a silver box to his nose, breathed deeply from its contents, and then passed the box to a child. Each child in turn buried his or her nose into the box

then passed it along. When the box reached me I sniffed it. A delicious fragrance rose up.

"The sweet smell of the *besumim*, is made up of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, symbolic of the sweetness of Shabbat now leaving us," Mr. Shapiro said. He spilled wine into the saucer and doused the braided candle in it. It went out with a hiss. Someone turned on the electric lights and the magical closeness of Shabbat in the dark vanished.

"*Shavua tov, shavua tov,* a good week, a good week," we all sang together. "Let the Prophet Elijah soon come to us. May we be to Jerusalem in the coming year."

After Shabbat ended, the electric lights and the ordinary furniture springing to my eyes broke the mystical, romantic and intimate feeling of the day.

"Anita, come help move the chairs," Cookie said.

"Do it yourself," Anita said.

"What's happening?" I said.

"Every Saturday night after Shabbat we have a dance," Selma said.

We rushed into the common room. All the chairs still stood in rows as they had for services in the morning. The smaller children moved them into a circle round the edges of the hall. Mrs. Shapiro ran in with a gramophone, set it on a table, bent down, pursed her lips and blew fluff off the needle. She wound up the machine and set the needle on the edge of a record and did

a little dance by herself. She *was* quite young, I thought. She probably missed London, too.

"Moonlight becomes you," crooned Frank Sinatra. The Shapiros sat and watched us dance. Mr. Shapiro had met his future wife at a dance. I guessed he'd only gone to look at the girls and spied Mrs. Shapiro dancing in the arms of each man. He'd fallen in love with her pixie-like charm. That didn't mean he danced. I'd read once that King David had danced in ecstasy before the holy ark and that his wife Michaelle had scolded him. I thought she was wrong. Men who danced could be exquisitely graceful.

Thanks to Norma Gelkoff I was by now an expert ballroom dancer. No one here was my match--except Anita who still looked angry. I asked her again, "What's wrong?"

"Shut up and dance," she said, and swung me hard into a waltz.

I loved dancing with Anita, even if she was angry.

All the small children hopped around with one another to the music. They thought it was grand to stay up late and dance to records.

As the waltz ended Anita broke away and ran upstairs. None of the others danced as well as her. Selma had no sense of rhythm, Cookie stepped on my toes, Marta danced stiffly, and Helga felt as limp as wet lettuce in my arms. Mrs. Shapiro had put on a polka. I wanted to dance with Anita.

I ran upstairs two at a time to look for her in the big girls' bedroom. She was sitting on the window seat viciously stabbing needles and pins into a pincushion. Her face was furiously red, twisted with rage. Tears streamed down her face.

"What's the matter, Anita?" I asked again.

"What's the matter?" she mimicked. "I'll tell you what's the matter. I opened this letter from my mother this evening."

She waved a white letter in front of me.

"That bastard my father left my mother for a younger woman. But he keeps coming back, knocking at the door begging my mother to let him in. And like a damned fool--" here Anita burst into furious sobs--"she lets him in. Every time she lets him in, he gets her pregnant. How can she be so stupid? We have no money, no food. He doesn't give us anything but more babies. I'd like to *kill* him," she screamed, kicking the wardrobe. "I'm so *furious* I could *die*."

She ran to the window, stood on the window seat and opened the window. I was afraid for her. We were three stories high. I put my arms round her waist, pulled her backward and we struggled. I hadn't realized how strong she was. We fell on to the wooden floor and rolled over and over, panting and grunting. I felt her hot body and firm breasts against mine, her tears on my face.

"Don't do it, don't do it," I panted.

"Let me go, it's my life. I'm fed up with it, there's

nothing to look forward to. Nobody cares about me, I'm worthless," she screamed. She broke loose and ran to the window again.

"I care about you, you're not worthless," I said.

I leaped and caught her by the legs. She kicked me in the eye. I screamed with pain, fell back on the floor clutching my eye. She immediately swung one leg over the window sill. I was on my knees and knew I couldn't reach her in time.

"Think of your mother," I screamed hoarsely.

In that moment she paused and looked back at me. Her face was bright red, her thick black hair stuck out in spikes, her dark eyes stormy and despairing, her face drenched in tears. She hesitated. I held out my arms. "Come to me," I said.

Slowly she brought her leg back onto the window-seat and sat in the window, her back to the garden. I stood up painfully and she fell into my arms sobbing. "That bastard, that bastard, I hate him, I hate all men."

"They're not all bad," I said, holding her trembling body.

Anita sobbed long and hard. After a while she grew calm.

"Would you like to wash your face and come downstairs?" I asked.

If I could get her back into the group she might forget her sorrows, at least for one night. She nodded slowly. We went to the bathroom. I washed her face, looked in the mirror and laughed at my own eye now swelling up, my hair standing on end. I pressed

a cold cloth to my eye. We brushed each others' hair gently.

"All right now?" I said.

She nodded, a little shamefaced.

We went downstairs slowly, arm in arm.

"What happened to you?" Mrs. Shapiro said.

"How did you get a black eye?" Selma said.

"Do you look funny," Cookie laughed.

"I ran upstairs to find Anita and walked into our door in the dark," I said.

They all laughed at my funny eye.

"I bet you and Anita had a fight." Cookie said. "You English."

Mr. Shapiro had said, "Compassion and morals make the difference between culture and civilization."

Had my newfound compassion for Selma and Anita civilized me, I wondered?

I held Anita close. She closed her eyes and leaned against me as we danced a slow waltz, circling the room. I sang the words to the record, softly in her ear:

Who's taking you home tonight
After the dance is through...
Who's the lucky guy who's going your way
To kiss you goodnight at your doorway
Who's taking you home tonight
Oh darling its plain to see
I'm pleading please let it be me.

Selma was dancing with Helga. She looked at me and smiled as if to say, "What's happening?" over Helga's shoulder. Marta and

Cookie were dancing together. Everyone's eyes looked dreamy. Anita and I waltzed slowly past Mr. and Mrs. Shapiro. They were humming the tune and holding hands behind their chairs. We knew it was the last dance, the end of a lovely day.

19.

Fifteenth Birthday

The following Friday evening after dinner, Selma, Helga, Cookie and I went out of the back door and strolled around the garden. In the dark, the ancient trees towered over us. Patches of white snow still glittered on the ground. This January night was cold. But the wind felt fresh on my face after we escaped the room, hot with its fire and Shabbat candles. We linked arms and pressed our bodies together to keep warm. Searchlights endlessly plunged into the depths of the dark skies cutting swathes of light, always reminding us of war and death while millions of calm stars reminded us of eternity.

Norma Huberman, a giggly eleven-year-old girl, ran out of the house and joined us. Tall and slim, with light blue eyes, almost white blonde hair and very pale skin, Norma looked more like an example of Hitler's typical "Aryan master race" than a Jewish girl. Norma was a close friend of Helga's and Nurse. She'd been bridesmaid at Nurse's marriage to a Jewish Brigade soldier in the British Army.

"My older brother's coming from London to see me next visiting day," Norma said, her teeth gleaming in the cold searchlight beams.

"Really?" I said. "How old is he?"

"Nineteen, and he has his own apartment."

"Just in time for your fifteenth birthday," Norma said.

"Oh, we never celebrate my birthday at home," I said.

"You are this time. Cookie has organized a birthday party for you," Norma said.

"Really? That's wonderful. I can't believe Cookie organized it. I've never had a birthday party before. How exciting."

"What does your brother do, Norma?" Selma asked, for once interested.

"He's a diamond cutter. He works in Hatton Garden."

"Oooh," we all said.

I thought how wonderful it would be to have my first birthday party and how nice to have a man visit as well. I wondered what Norma's brother would be like. I believed that anyone who worked in the London diamond center must be rich. I imagined Hatton Garden full of shops totally encrusted inside and out with thousands of glittering diamonds.

"Finally, we'll get to see a man near our own age," I said.

"Near *your* age. He's an old man to me," Cookie said. "All we see are the little boys in the hostel and Yanks on trains. We'll never know how to act with boys our own age."

Norma's brother would probably not even look at me. He'd think I was too young, I thought, sighing. Selma was younger than me but had a better figure. He'd probably go for her.

"It must be so glamorous working in Hatton Garden," Anita said, waving her left hand in the air and twisting her ring

finger. "Look at my diamond ring," and we pretended to admire a huge diamond ring on her third left finger.

"It's gorgeous," I said. "Was it expensive?"

"It's very rude to ask how much something costs," Marta, our etiquette expert, said.

"When are you getting married, Anita?" Cookie joked.

"Sunday," Anita said, "to Norma's brother when he comes. We've been writing secretly to each other for six months. And Norma is going to be my new sister-in-law, right?"

We all laughed.

"Let's go inside, I'm freezing," Anita said.

Visiting day came, but since most of the children had no relatives, there were few visitors. Although I had many relatives, none ever came to see me, not even on my birthday.

The refugee children thought English-born children lucky to have families. We might have been luckier than they were, but we were not always as happy as they imagined. Our families were far from perfect. Though my family could have visited me almost any time, certainly on a Sunday, they never did, not even on special occasions like my birthday or once, when I was very ill.

Only a few visitors arrived on the afternoon train. One was Mrs. Rozenfeld, who was on the Committee of the hostel. The hostel was supervised by Rabbi Munk and his shul in Golders Green, London. Mrs. Rozenfeld was an active member of that

synagogue. She came down once a month to check on the children at the hostel. With her tall, slender figure, her white skin, dark eyes and aquiline nose, she seemed to be the height of elegance. Her dresses fit her exactly, as if they'd been stitched on to her body--yet they were never tight. They moved with her. We waved and smiled to each other as she came in the red front door. I was fond of her because she treated me as if I were someone special and an equal. She always asked what I was doing and how I felt. She seemed genuinely interested in me.

The other visitor I noticed was a strange, handsome young man. Norma ran to him and kissed him. They headed for the kitchen. I supposed she intended to make him a cup of tea and chat with him there. After half an hour, I casually walked through the kitchen on the way to the Green Room. Brother and sister were talking earnestly to each other. I didn't look at them.

"Gilda, this is my brother, Hans," Norma said.

"Oh, Hallo," I said, stopping as if surprised.

Hans's long, elegant legs stretched all the way under the table as he lounged back lazily in his chair.

He unwound his legs gracefully and stood up. I looked up at him, so long and languid. He was over six feet tall, slim and elegant as a heron. I admired his immaculate dark suit, white shirt and gray tie. Gold cuff links winked from his shirt-sleeves. His wide-brimmed, black velvety hat, worn by many

religious men, sat aslant his pale blond hair, a lock of which fell into his blue eyes. I thought of the song, Bobby Shaftoe, "tall and fair, combing down his yellow hair."

"How do you do? I hear it's your fifteenth birthday today. Many happy returns," Hans said in a pleasant soft voice. He had a charming foreign accent like that of my hero, Charles Boyer.

"Thank you," I said. I felt my face grow hot with pleasure and knew I was blushing. Then I blushed again because I knew I was blushing.

"Norma said you're having a birthday party. May I come?"

"Of course," I said, blushing again. "I'm very excited, I've never had a birthday party before."

I was delighted he was coming, though a little worried that a man of nineteen might be bored at a birthday party with a lot of children.

"He's joking," Norma said, her blue eyes sparkling like his.

"Oh, you mean he's not really coming?" I said.

Hans just smiled. I couldn't tell whether he was or wasn't coming to the party.

As a special treat Mrs. Bramson had used everyone's flour, margarine and chocolate rations to bake me a huge round chocolate birthday cake. She also made real lemonade, though goodness knows where she got the lemons; citrus fruit was very hard to get.

"Thank you, thank you so much," I said, admiring all that

chocolate in one place. I'd never had a birthday cake before.

She smiled warmly. Pity she was such a young widow, I thought.

After dusting my birthday cake with a little sugar, she sat at the kitchen window looking in her mirror. She put the finishing touches to her face, lots of rouge and lipstick. I wondered if she were expecting a man to visit her. Hans frowned.

"What's the matter?" I whispered.

"I hate heavy makeup, it's so false," he whispered back.

"I do, too," I said, "but I'll use a little when I'm older."

"I hope you don't use it here," he said, "from what I've heard about him, Mr.Shapiro would be after you."

Norma smiled but didn't let out my guilty secret. I didn't tell Hans that I used Pond's cold cream every night and in the day a touch of blush and lipstick. Mummy had often said I needed country air because I was so pale. Who needed country air? Mummy had a favorite ditty she used to sing as she put on her makeup in the morning.

Little dabs of powder
Little dabs of paint
Make a lady beautiful
When she really 'aint.

As far as I was concerned, a little lipstick and rouge solved the problem.

Hans smiled at me and I smiled back guilelessly with my slightly lipsticked mouth. I left Hans and Norma to talk alone. Visiting day was only once a month, and they needed time

together. In the afternoon I spied Norma walking with Hans in the garden. I suddenly gave in to Anita who had been nagging me for a walk to the pond.

"Hello," we said when we passed. I couldn't help blushing every time Hans looked at me. I wished I could control it. If he knew how excited I was at seeing him, he would laugh at me.

Norma called us over. "D'you want to see Hans' new cigarette case?"

"We would," Anita and I said together, moving toward them.

"Would you like a cigarette?" he asked, holding out the wafer-thin silver case. I was terribly impressed by it and Hans went up in my estimation even more. He pressed a button on the side and the lid sprang open. Twelve Turkish cigarettes--gold tipped, oval, almost flat, the kind Zada smoked, the kind I loved to see and smell--lay in a row, six in the lid and six in the bottom of the case. They were held gently in place by a gold cloth band across each center.

"Do you smoke?" Hans asked.

"Oh no," I said in horror, eyes wide.

I didn't want him to think I smoked. And if Mr. Shapiro saw me smoking, I was sure he'd have a fit. Mummy had once given me a cigarette when I was twelve.

"Go on, try it, see if you like it," she'd said.

Mummy had taken short puffs on hers. She didn't smoke much and only at home. "Ladies don't put on make-up or smoke in

public," she said.

Smoking didn't excite me much. If someone offered me a cigarette, I'd accept just to be sociable. But I did love the smell of cigarettes, especially Turkish ones, and I loved the aroma of Mr. Shapiro's pipe tobacco. The smell reminded me that a man was nearby, that someone would protect me. But if Hans didn't like heavy make-up, he wouldn't approve of a woman smoking. He was a European male, a bit old-fashioned despite being only nineteen. I wanted him to like me, so I pretended I had never smoked.

The four of us walked back inside and sat in the kitchen. Selma came in, but Hans ignored her and spoke only to me. I was glad I wore my Jaeger cardigan.

"Excuse me, I'm going to get some tea for my brother," Norma said, and went to the gas stove. Selma, Hans and I sat for a moment without speaking. Norma lit a match and put the kettle on.

"I'm hoping to go home to London for the weekend," I said, to break the silence.

"You must come and visit me," Hans said immediately.

Dare I visit a man in his house, I wondered. I'd have liked to invite him to our house but I couldn't very well if Norma didn't come, too. I'd never heard of her going up to London. Yet I imagined blond Hans and me walking arm in arm, or holding hands like Mr. and Mrs. Shapiro at the dance. A picture flashed into

my mind of us holding hands and looking enrapt in the windows of Hatton Garden diamond center for an engagement ring. For the moment I'd forgotten about the dark-haired lover of my dreams. I even forgot about the birthday party.

"When does the birthday party begin?" Hans asked.

"Soon, I hope. Visitors have to leave by six and it's five now. What time is your train back to London?"

He was about to answer when Cookie dashed into the kitchen and shouted, "Everyone come into the dining room, the birthday party's about to begin."

Hans lazily unwound his legs from under the kitchen table again and stood. Helga and Cookie grabbed me by the arms and pulled me out of the kitchen and into the dining room. Mrs. Bramson carried in the cake. Selma brought the lemonade. It was like a parade and all for me. I almost danced along. Hans followed us. Everyone began singing, "Happy birthday to you," and clapping.

We all trooped into the dining room, shoes clacking on the bare wood floors. As we walked, he so much taller than me, Hans looked Selma up and down once, the way I noticed men did. Then he smiled at me. He had a lazy, slow smile which started with the corners of his eyes crinkling and ended with each end of his mouth curling up.

Perhaps he likes girls with dark wavy hair and almond-shaped eyes, I thought.

The dining room table was piled with birthday cards and presents in odd-shaped boxes, tumbling over each other on the dining room table. They were from the big girls. The children had nothing with which to make or give a present, but they crowded round the tables.

"Happy Birthday," the children all shouted at once.

"Thank you," I said, beaming a smile on all of them.

The whole hostel was there, all forty girls and boys, Mrs. Shapiro, Nurse and Mrs. Bramson and Hans. Mr. Shapiro had gone into his study with Mrs. Rozenfeld to discuss, I supposed, hostel matters.

Hans sat down with the children, his long legs stretching under the table. He kept his black hat on. I thought him terribly sophisticated with his smart clothes and silver cigarette case. I was sure we seemed like country bumpkins to him. But he seemed completely at ease.

"We have a birthday surprise for you," Marta said.

"Oh, what is it?" I asked, a little warily.

"We've all decided to elect you Head Girl of the White House," she said. The head girl was responsible for maintaining the school rules and keeping up the morale of the girls.

"Isn't that right, kids?" she said to the others.

"Right, I second the motion," Selma said.

"All in favor say aye," Marta shouted.

"Aye," went up a big roar. The small children jumped up and

down.

A dozen friends and children pumped my hand or patted me on the back. I was covered with blushes. "What an honor, such a surprise, thank you. I don't know what to say," I said, my voice trembling. I knew the older girls liked me, though I wasn't sure about Cookie. A head girl was usually appointed by a headmistress or headmaster. I was sure Mr. Shapiro would agree to this arrangement, but it was good to be elected by popular vote anyway. In either case the head girl always had the respect and admiration of the girls. What difference did it make how it came about?

"Hip, hip," shouted Anita.

"Hooray," everyone roared back.

Anita called hip hip and they shouted hooray three times. Everyone clapped. Tears trembled on my eyelashes. I was saved from making a speech by Cookie.

"Open your birthday cards," she commanded.

There was one from each of the big girls, from Selma, Helga, Anita, Marta and Cookie, Paula and Norma, hand-drawn or painted.

"Oh, Cookie's has fifteen kisses on it," I said, counting.

"One must be for me," Hans said, teasingly.

"Go on, give him a kiss," Cookie said.

"Oh, Cookie," I said, "don't be daft."

I turned my burning face away, and fumbled with the boxes piled on the table.

"Hurry up, open your presents," Cookie said.

"Yes, go on," urged Selma and Helga.

Norma sat next to her brother, her arm linked in his, the two so blonde and blue-eyed, like twins except for the difference in age. How wonderful it must be to have a big brother, or a boy friend. I peeked at him from under my eyelashes. I thought he was studying my figure, I wasn't sure. I kept my head bent on the presents to avoid meeting his eye.

I tore off the brown or newspaper wrappings--there was no fancy paper during the war. String was also hard to get so some gifts were tied with yarn.

"Oh, this jar of scented bath salts is beautiful, thank you, Selma," I said.

Where had she got the money, I wondered. We kissed each other.

"Open mine, open mine," Cookie cried.

"A note book, what a lovely orange cover, thanks Cookie," I said and kissed her gingerly, barely grazing her lean cheek. She was such a hoyden she might bite me in fun.

"It's to use as a diary," Cookie said.

"Just what I wanted. I'll start using it tonight," I said. Strange it was Cookie who gave me what I wanted most, a diary.

Helga gave me a pretty lace handkerchief, Marta a little sewing set, and Anita, four new steel knitting needles. I thanked them all, and gave them each a kiss on the cheek. Hans watched,

smiling.

"Let's play Postman's Knock," Cookie said. "Go out."

I went out of the room. "Come back," Cookie called out. "Your penalty is to smack Hans's face," Cookie said.

"I couldn't possibly do that, you have to give me something else," I said, horrified.

Hans sat back, amused.

"Well then you have to kiss him," Cookie said.

I blushed terribly and squirmed in my seat.

"I hear you have a good voice, will you sing us a song?" Hans said quickly.

I flashed him a grateful smile, stood up and sang.

When a body meets a body coming through the rye.
If a body kiss a body, need that body cry?
Ilk a laddie ilk a lassie, nane they say, not I,
Yet all the lads they smile at me, when coming
through the rye.

I wasn't sure if the words were right, but no one else would know either. Did they know that 'ilk' meant like and 'nane' meant no? When I finished, everyone clapped. If I couldn't kiss Hans, then at least I'd sung a song about kissing.

I cut the birthday cake and gave the staff and all the children a piece, and Hans an extra large piece. Selma poured lemonade for everyone.

"This is my first ever birthday party," I said to everyone. "I love it."

"By the way," Hans said, as we all ate our cake, "I

understand you knew a boy named Joseph Singer."

"Yes, I did," I said, my voice trembling a little. "How do you know him?" I asked. Did he know about my disastrous love letter to Joseph?

"I met him in London."

"Did he say anything about me?" I asked.

Hans was about to answer when Nurse said, "Visiting hours are over, visitors must leave in fifteen minutes. Cookie, go and collect money from the visitors to plant trees in Israel."

"Hans," I said, as he rose to his feet to leave, "what did he say?"

"Have to tell you next time," Hans said. I was infuriated.

"Goodbye," I said and rushed away, glad that Hans hadn't seen the tears pricking my eyes. I still didn't know if Joseph had ever seen my letter. If so, surely he'd been curious about me. Would I ever meet him? What was Hans about to tell me?

Mrs. Rozenfeld put her hand on my shoulder.

"Is everything going well, dear?" she asked me. "Why are you trembling?"

"It's the excitement of my fifteenth birthday and all the gifts I received," I lied.

"Your fifteenth birthday? Well, here's a pound note. Spend it on something nice for yourself."

"Many thanks, Mrs. Rozenfeld."

"How are your studies going? Getting ready for Matriculation?"

"I'm trying," I said, "but it's hard to study with all the noise going on in the evenings. The younger kids run, slam doors, stamp and jump up and down the stairs. We have three hours of homework a night and it's hard to concentrate. If I don't pass matric I won't be allowed to apply for college."

"I'll see what I can do," she said, wrinkling her brow.

"Thank you, Mrs. Rozenfeld." I squeezed her hand.

I didn't like to tell Mrs. Rozenfeld about the recent struggle with Mr. Shapiro to get the Green Room. Since he'd begun to work with me, my grades had soared back to A's. But lately, if he became annoyed with one of us big girls he took away our privilege of using the Green Room. Far from the dormitories, this room was the quietest place in which to study.

The clock struck six.

"Goodbye," said Hans, appearing. "Happy birthday," he said as he leaned down and kissed my cheek. When his lips touched my skin, I felt a tremor run through my whole body. Of course I blushed again. All the girls screamed, hugged each other and jumped up and down.

"He kissed her, he kissed her."

I was sure I was scarlet with excitement, pleasure, and embarrassment. Thankfully Mr. Shapiro hadn't seen it.

Hans left quickly, his hat set jauntily on his head. I watched him through the window striding on his daddy longlegs toward his train.

That evening I sighed with satisfaction and lay on my cot in

the dark. What a wonderful day it had been: I'd been elected Head Girl. Mrs. Rozenfeld had given me a whole pound and would get us the Green Room. Most important, I'd had my first kiss from a real man. True he didn't look like my ideal dark-haired lover, but he was handsome. And had kissed me. He made me feel like a real young woman.

"A lovely fifteenth birthday," I wrote in my new orange-covered diary.

20.

Yanks on Trains

As usual Selma, Cookie, Helga and I caught the 8 a.m. train from Great Chesterford to my new high school in Bishops Stortford. Bishops Stortford was a country town in East Anglia, Essex, about fifteen miles south of Great Chesterford, and on the way to London.

As we left our tiny village with its one shop and one pub, the skinny stationmaster slowly waved his red flag up and down and blew his whistle. With a grinding of wheels, a hoot and a white puff, the great black train began to move. The four of us walked along the train corridor looking for a good carriage, not too crowded or with Yanks in it, when I had a shock.

I saw a flash of long red hair flying in the wind as Miss Curzon, our young new art teacher, leapt onto the train's running board, slamming the door behind her. Like a hurricane on three inch heels, she hurtled along the corridor, her short skirts flaunting her endlessly long silk-stockinged legs. She strode straight up to a tall Yank officer lounging in the doorway of a carriage, flung her arms round his neck, and kissed him full on the lips. He wrapped his arms round her waist, pulled her close gently, and kissed her back in a leisurely way. I thought he seemed terribly experienced and blase, and she, like a young schoolgirl in love. Was this the same unsmiling, cut-and-dried Miss Curzon, who gave us art lessons?

I pulled the three girls into an empty carriage and pointed a trembling finger down the corridor.

"L-l-look at Miss Curzon," I said.

When the Yank came up for breath, I noticed no bright red lipstick on him. I remembered there was a new lipstick that didn't come off when you kissed someone.

We poked our heads out of our carriage, and gaped.

"Did you see that?" I said. "Not only is she kissing a Yank in front of everyone, she kissed him *first*. It's scandalizing. I can't believe my eyes."

"And she's wearing shorter skirts and higher heels than any teacher in the school," Helga said. "Isn't she ashamed? Isn't she afraid of getting found out and reported to the headmistress?"

"She'd be fired, for sure," Selma said.

"No she wouldn't," Cookie said. "There's a big shortage of teachers, because so many women are in the services and the Land Army."

"I never suspected she was like this in art class," I said. "She's acting as if she's engaged to him."

None of our teachers were married. They were forbidden. And none of them dressed like Miss Curzon.

"Can you imagine Miss Atzomer dressed like that?" Helga asked.

"Or someone kissing Miss Stapleton," I said.

"Who'd *want* to kiss Miss Stapleton?" Cookie said.

We all broke out into our favorite song which exactly fit Miss Stapleton:

My teacher's got a bunion
A face like a pickled onion
A nose like a squashed tomato
And legs like matchsticks.

We collapsed in a heap on top of each other, laughing. After quieting down, we poked our heads out of the door again to see if anything new was happening.

Miss Curzon was still locked in the officer's arms, his cap tipped back on his head, the peak gleaming. He now nibbled on her ear and whispered into it. She threw her head back, arching her white neck, which he kissed, and she laughed heartily. She had strong, white teeth which gleamed against her red lipstick, and each tooth we could see was perfect. Were it not for her Scottish accent she would have looked American. The train had gathered speed and she and the officer, navels pinned together, were swaying slightly with it.

"Well I never. Kissing, hugging and laughing loudly in public. How careless. What about her reputation?" Selma said.

"*Really,*" Helga said. "Did you ever see such immoral behavior? And in *public*. And she's a teacher, too."

I thought Miss Curzon terribly daring and romantic, but I didn't think I'd kiss a Yank or any man in public. But then I was only fifteen. However, I was very excited to see Miss Curzon kissing the American. In a way I wished I could be both as

beautiful and as daring as she.

We sneaked away as if *we* had misbehaved. We sat down in an empty carriage on the velvet seats and chattered about Miss Curzon. Cookie jumped up and put her water bottle on the overhead net rack along with our gas masks. She was always thirsty. The bottle and the masks rocked with the soothing motion of the train. I loved the rhythm of the wheels, "Going to school, going to school."

Selma and Helga sat on one side of the carriage, Cookie and I on the other, facing each other. There was room for about six people on each side, so we could spread our satchels and gas masks out instead of putting them on the net racks overhead as usual. A cold sun shone through the windows. I enjoyed our daily ride to school with the girls.

As the train rattled on, we passed many fields in which Land Girls in jodhpurs and knee-high boots threw hay onto a stack with a pitchfork. We saw sheep and cows, and an old man, leg cocked, climbing over a stile between two fields. Just beyond him I watched a Yank pedal on a wobbly bicycle. I'd never before seen a Yank on a bike in England.

We took Hebrew books from our satchels and began studying our homework for that night's class with Mr. Shapiro. I was anxious to be well prepared. I wanted to please him. The train squealed to a stop at Audley End, one of the two American airforce bases on the way to school.

Two American soldiers, or perhaps they were airmen--I couldn't tell the difference, they all wore khaki--got into our carriage. Selma, Cookie and Helga were used to Americans, since they'd been riding on this train for a long time. I had seen Yanks only a few times in Ely, passing them in the street. They'd asked us for dates sometimes, but we'd scuttle away saying, "We're under sixteen." Then *they* scuttled away. It was different on the trains. Here we could sit and talk to them.

"Hiya girls," they said.

"Hallo," I said cautiously, still not used to speaking to men.

I couldn't help staring at them, they were so handsome. The train started off again as the stationmaster gravely waved his red flag up and down and blew his whistle. Under the clackety-clack of the wheels I whispered in Selma's ear, "The Yanks all look like film stars. Their uniforms look so much softer and fit so much better than the Tommies.' That officer's khaki is almost pink."

"You can see their figures, too," Selma whispered. "They have all different size and shape bums. You can't see the shape of Tommies' behinds, because their trousers are all so baggy."

She was right. Besides being just tall or short, fat or thin, I realized men, too, had differently shaped bums, as well as chests and waists. I covertly looked at their bodies, exploring new territory. The train drew into another station.

Women with children or older men boarded. Young Tommies and Yanks leaped onto the running board, then entered the train. A British airman in his light blue uniform came into our compartment.

"Ooh, isn't *he* smart," Cookie said, pointing at a tall British officer striding down the platform. His uniform fitted his broad shoulders and slim waist perfectly.

"Must have been made in Saville Row," I said. "I hear that's where all the toffs have their clothes made."

"What's the use of that leather band across his chest and that tiny stick in his hand? " Helga said. "Couldn't kill a fly."

"It's a swagger stick. Shows he's an officer," I said.

A short Tommie batman with a worried face hurried behind the officer like a dog, holding out leather gloves. He called out, "Captain, Sir, you forgot your gloves."

People on the platform made way for the officer. He looked neither right nor left as his batman ran to catch up with him. I thought it strange a grown man had to have someone look after him. The upper class probably always had someone to serve them. Perhaps a swagger stick was so called because officers swaggered.

I had mixed feelings about the upper class. My parents always stressed that we were working class and I felt the upper class were snobs. At the same time, I wished I could be one of them. Most were gentiles, though and some, like Mosley, anti-semitic. But it didn't matter. I'd never be accepted into the upper class anyway. When I said I was born in Bethnal Green,

even the Jewish middle class pulled a face and said, "aow," the way we said "Oh."

"Smart upper class snobs, those English officers," Selma said. "Public school boys. Never say hello. At least the Yanks are friendly, even the officers. Sometimes too friendly."

"Tommies treat us like school girls, Yanks treat us like women or at least young ladies," Cookie said.

"Yes, I like that," I said.

The Yanks had taken out their Camels and magazines, lounged back, and spread their long legs into the middle of the compartment. One with blond hair chewed pink gum with his mouth open, which nauseated me. I'd been raised to eat with my mouth closed. In horror I watched his teeth and tongue shove about the wad of pink mess in his mouth. He carelessly flicked the pages of a magazine with Betty Grable stretched across the front. Her long white legs, in stiletto heels I would die to wear, stretched in front of her. She smiled toothily into the camera.

"Woo-hoo," said the redhead, "Look at those gams."

"Ah rayd that her legs are *in*sured for a million dollars," said the blond Yank. He had a stranger accent than the redhead.

The blond Yank, who was about twenty, leaned toward us. "Hey kids, lark some chocolate?" He offered us a Hershey bar.

I looked at Selma. She nodded faintly.

"Thank you," we said, as he handed me the chocolate. I caressed the nut bumps through the brown wrapper with my

fingertip, already savoring the taste of the chocolate and the nut. I hadn't tasted chocolate since my birthday, two months before. I broke the bar into four pieces, a piece for each of us, and peeled off the brown and silver paper. I put the silver paper in my satchel for the war effort. I sucked my piece of chocolate, not wanting it to melt too fast, crunching the nuts slowly, trying to make it all last.

I could just hear an English soldier standing in the corridor mutter to his mate, "Damned Yanks. Overpaid, over-dressed, oversexed, and over here."

It was true, a lot of English women went out with Yanks. If I'd been only four years older, I'd have been going for them myself, unless as good a Tommy presented himself. I pictured myself in a closefitting blue dress and silk stockings, which you could only get on the black market or from a Yank. The stockings had a square just over the heels and a line up the back of the leg. If I couldn't get silk stockings, I'd draw a line on the back of my leg like many women did. I imagined myself in highheeled shoes, a darling little hat with a veil, mascara, lipstick, powder and perfume, just like Aunty Regina. Or like Miss Curzon. Yanks *and* Brits, Canadians, Australians, Free French, and the Jewish Brigade would flock to me. I wondered if Joseph Singer would find me attractive as well.

The Hebrew book of short stories lay in my lap, its heavy square letters sharply outlined against the white page. As I

daydreamed about Joseph Singer, my head rested against the back of the velvet seat, my eyes closed. I was roused from my daydream by a Yank.

"Hey, I know that language," the redheaded Yank said to me.

"You do? You can read Hebrew?" I said and he nodded and laughed. "You're the first American Jew I've met," I said. "I didn't even know there were Jews in America."

"You don't think I got barmitzva'd for nothin' do you?"

I was so excited to meet an American Jew, I shook his hand.

Cookie rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

The redhead smiled happily. He leaned over Selma's Hebrew book to look at it and moved a strand of her hair back, gently.

"Don't touch my hair," she protested, pulling away.

"My name's Joey Stern, what's yours?" he said, smiling.

Helga and I told him our names, shyly. Selma ignored the soldiers and hunched further over her book. Cookie said, "And I'm Cookie. Where are you from in the States?"

"I'm from Noo York," Joey said, "and my friend here," he jabbed the blond in the arm, "is Clint. He's from Mississippi."

Clint pushed his cap back on his head, looked up from his girlie magazine and said lazily, "Hiya girls," then ignored us. Of course, I thought, how could we compete with Betty Grable? The smoke from his Camel swirled up to the ceiling like the steam from my father's hot towels in the barber shop.

The train chugged on, passing a crossing where six trucks of soldiers waited to pass. Joey sat next to me. I could feel his warm breath on my cheek as he looked over my shoulder at the book. He smelled of a good shaving lotion, like the one my father used and a light, clean sweat. The scent and warmth of his body near mine gave my heart a sudden thump. I'd never been this close to a man.

"Say, I didn't even know there were Jews in England."

"There are not only Jews here, there's anti-semitism," I said.

"Anti-semitism? You've got to be kidding. The English? Impossible. They're so polite!"

I told him about the Cable Street battle and the British Union of Fascists, how Mosley and his gang had tried to march through our Jewish East End and smash up shops and people and how the Jews, unionists and communists had come out and beaten them back.

"My Uncle Max was one of those who fought the Fascists. He's in the army, now," I said proudly.

"Ya don't say," Joey said, with a warm smile.

"I hoped that was the end of Fascism but I was mistaken," I said. "When I first came to the countryside, people felt our heads for horns. And there's a horrible man who tells us Hitler didn't murder enough Jews and he ought to finish the job. My scripture teacher, Miss Blood, told the whole class right in

front of me that all Jews are rich because they're hypocrites, cheats and liars."

Joey shook his head in bewilderment, "Unbelievable."

"You really thought there were no Jews in England?" I said.

"You really didn't know there were Jews in America?" Joey said. "There are Jews in every state."

Clint frowned at us but said nothing. I wondered if there was anti-semitism in America.

The English airman said, "I've just come back from India and there was a Jewish man I met who knew nine languages without ever having bothered to learn them. . ."

"He probably escaped across nine countries, and picked them up en route," I said.

They laughed, but I didn't think a hunted man was funny.

"I have a penpal in America," I said to Joey and Clint. "Last year I saw a letter in *Life* magazine from an American boy who said he was against segregation of negroes. I wrote back saying I agreed with him and now we write to each other. His name's Frank Robinson."

"You mean to tell me some jerk wrote a letter to *Life Magazine* saying he was against segregation?" Clint said.

"Yes. I don't believe in segregation, do you?" I said.

"Are you one of them nigger lovers?" Clint said.

"We don't use that word here," I said. "Is there really segregation in America?"

"Oh sure, them niggers can't come into our movies, restaurants, stores, bathrooms, or use our water fountains. They get out of line, we lynch 'em."

"Take it easy, Clint," Joey said.

The airman said, "Shut up, pal," but Clint ignored them.

"I thought America was supposed to be a democracy," I said angrily. "Don't Negro soldiers fight in the war?"

"Yeah, the Third Regiment. They're segregated from us, too, otherwise I'd kill them before the Nazis got them," Clint said.

"Oh, how awful," Selma and I said, together. Helga's brown eyes were wide with horror.

"It *is* a democracy," Joey said, squirming a little, "but there is segregation. I don't agree with it, but that's America."

Clint sounded like a Nazi. He was full of hatred and prejudice. I wanted to kill him.

Clint jumped up and shouted furiously, "I'd like to stick a knife in every nigger's ribs."

He made grotesque stabbing movements, pretending to stick and twist a knife into some Negro's ribs. His pale face turned red, his eyes bloodshot, his thin mouth twisted with hatred. His sudden violence shocked and frightened me.

The train thundered along and gave a mournful hoot.

I jumped up.

"You're disgusting," I said, "I'm calling the conductor then

I'm getting out of here." I raised my arm to pull the emergency brake.

"Don't take any notice of him, we're not all like that," Joey said. "Please stay and have tea with me when we get off."

"Sorry. We're going to another carriage," I said, getting up. The girls followed me.

"I hope you don't condemn all Americans because of him," Joey said. "Please stay. I was so happy to meet you."

"Well, all right. We'll stay for you," I said. "You shouldn't be punished because of him. Though I wish he'd leave."

"You're a wonderful girl," Joey said.

The train hooted again. We girls knew that we were about to enter a tunnel. I quickly rose from my seat in the dark and slipped through the sliding door into the corridor. For a minute we were plunged into pitch black while the train rattled on. As we came out into the light I slipped back into my seat and Joey said, "Where did you get to, I wanted to kiss you."

"I know," I said, and laughed.

Clint was standing in the aisle screaming, "I'm soaked, look at me. How did this happen?" Water poured off his head, dripping down his nose and on to his chest. His trousers were wet at the crotch. His hair stuck to his head.

Cookie stared out of the window with a little smile on her face, her water bottle on the overhead rack rocking with the movement of the train. Clint rushed out to the lavatory. He came

back, swaying with the train motion, still damp, threw himself down on the seat, and immediately fell asleep.

We all breathed a sigh of relief.

"Would you mind opening the window, it's a little smelly in here," Selma said. The windows could only be opened by yanking on a thick leather strap at the bottom. Yanks hated the cold. They liked the carriage to be like a hothouse and usually protested against anyone opening the window. To my surprise Joey jumped up and let the window down by its leather strap.

"You actually did it!" I said faintly.

Everyone laughed.

At Stansted, the American air base, the airman and sailor got off and four more Yanks got into our carriage. Clint awoke sulky. The water seemed to have dampened his spirit. He went back to his magazine. I would have left the carriage, but Joey pleaded with us to stay. He seemed lonely, and I was so glad to meet an American Jew who could read our language.

The new Yanks said, "Hiyer fellas, hiyer girls." It was a great relief to get back to normal.

"I'm on my way to London," a tall officer said. "Hear it's a great city. Got a three-day pass. Boy am I happy, ainchoo?" he asked, poking his long, lean, booted friend in the ribs.

"Wish I could go to London," I said. "I love London."

"This is our first visit. D'you know what it's like?" asked the captain.

"Do I? I was born there. London is the most wonderful city in the world," I said.

"I bet you haven't even been to any other countries," the private said.

"How could I?" I said, "The war's been on for half my life."

"Are you from London, too?" the captain asked Selma.

"I'm from Great Chesterford," Selma said.

She didn't want to say she'd been born in Germany. Many German Jewish refugees who fled to England were treated as Nazi spies. My friend Esther's father had escaped with his family to England, only to be sent immediately to Australia on the infamous ship, *Dunera*. Its malicious captain, First Lieutenant O'Neill, hated Jews. He threatened to tie Esther's father to the mast by his beard and then throw him overboard. It was ridiculous to think of fourteen-year-old Selma as a German spy, but I understood her fear.

"Where in London do you come from?" the captain asked me.

"From the East End," I said. "Yanks never go to the East End. You'll probably only go to the West End, where all the restaurants, theaters, and night clubs are. It's lots of fun.

"Do you know where Piccadilly is?" the private asked me.

"You bet," I said.

Everyone, including Selma, burst out laughing.

"Why is everybody laughing?" I asked, looking at each face, feeling foolish. "What's the joke?"

Selma whispered into my ear, "Piccadilly is full of prostitutes."

I felt myself blushing and shouted indignantly, "That is definitely not what Piccadilly is known for. It's the center of London. It's where the statue of Eros, the Greek god of love stands, his bow and arrow ready to shoot someone in the heart and make them fall in love. Before the war I remember seeing men in Piccadilly wearing tails and top hats and women in long dresses and furs. It was the fanciest place in London."

"Speaking of Eros, I've heard it's a monument to the generosity of your Englishwomen toward us Americans," the Yank officer said.

"What do you mean?" I asked. All the men laughed while I remained puzzled. Selma and Cookie smiled unsurely and Helga looked as puzzled as I felt. The men laughed long and loudly.

Joey and Clint got off at the next station. I went to the window to say goodbye to Joey. I really liked him. But Clint had spoiled the day. He walked away from Joey without a word.

From the platform Joey looked up said, "I'm really sorry about Clint. Maybe things will change in America after the war. But I'm glad we met you girls. Hope we'll meet again. Bye."

I felt sad to see Joey go and afraid that there were still more people like Clint. Suppose he felt toward Jews as he did toward dark-skinned people? The idea was depressing.

I moved away from the platform window and looked out the

other side of the train. Three dark-haired men wearing one-piece camouflage suits were working on the tracks. Suddenly one of them looked up and stared with dark, despairing eyes directly into mine. I was shocked by his hopeless expression. He was young, good-looking, and healthy.

He turned away, shoulders bent as he dug his shovel into the stones on the tracks. Then I saw six-inch black letters on his back: P.O.W.

"What does P.O.W. mean?" I asked Selma.

"Prisoner of War. They're Eyties, Italians."

"Surely you've seen P.O.W.s before?" Cookie said.

"No, never," I said, trembling slightly.

At first I felt sorry for them, prisoners in a foreign country. Then I thought: These men were followers of Mussolini, fascists like Mosley's thugs, who'd planned a Kristallnacht for Jews in East London even before the Germans. Close up, the enemy always looked so human. He could be the boy next door.

At the next station a big sign said, "Is this journey really necessary?" Trains were often reserved for the troops, and civilians were asked to travel as little as possible. A second poster showed a man with thick lips and goggling eyes whispering in another's ear. The message beneath read, "Loose Lips Lose Lives."

I realized the Yanks never spoke about the war or what they did.

They behaved like friendly visitors to England, with no responsibilities.

We went back to the carriage where the London bound Yanks sat. The Americans talked about their schools and their families and flirted lightly. Perhaps we reminded them of their girlfriends or their little sisters.

We got off at Bishops Stortford and said goodbye to them.

"Give my love to London," I said.

We trudged up the tree-lined street to school.

When we returned to the White House that evening a blue air-letter awaited me. I recognized Mummy's writing.

April, 1943

> I've been drafted into war work you'll never guess what. I'm now a Lady Almoner in a V.D. Clinic. There's been a huge increase in V.D. since the Yanks got here. I take down their information when they come in and then they get some kind of bath, yellow. I think it's sulphur. The joke is that the British used to supply the Yanks with condoms but they were too small. Now they get their condoms from America. Let's hope they fit!
>
> The bombs have been awful. Hope we make it to the end of the war. Not long, now. Enclose ten bob for pocket money.
>
> Love
>
> Mum

I understood part of the letter. We'd sold condoms in the shop since I was a child. It was my job, before the war, to stick the little packages of Red Letters around the mirrors in the men's section every Wednesday afternoon when Daddy came home

from the wholesaler. The men often bought one Friday evening or Saturday after their shave and haircut, the way they bought a pack of cigarettes. But I didn't know exactly what men did with them or why Americans needed bigger ones. That was still a mystery to me. I knew it was funny because Mummy said so.

About a week after the Clint and Joey event, a new 'adventure' occurred on the train. Cookie, my bete noire, sat behind me. I was knitting a khaki sock for the troops using the four steel needles Anita had given me for my birthday. Sharply pointed at both ends, the nine inch needles made tiny clashing noises every time I knitted a stitch.

Cookie, sitting behind me, kept pulling my hair.

"Stop it," I said, without turning round.

She pulled my hair harder. By now it was the fourth time. I turned round furiously to thump her on the head. As I turned, one end of a needle plunged into my abdomen.

"I'm stabbed," I screamed, looking down. The glittering needle stuck out of my middle like a sword. Blood oozed out. Helga screamed too.

Two American officers leapt to their feet.

"What's wrong, what happened?" one asked, leaning over me. His concerned face was so close to me I could see each separate gold eyelash fringing his green eyes. He looked like Henry Fonda, handsome, gentlemanly, unhurried and sympathetic. His

friend stood behind him peering over his shoulder.

"Does it hurt?" the officer said.

Taught to keep a stiff upper lip like all other English children I answered, "A bit," and snivelled. I felt ridiculous and frightened. I was terrified of the glittering steel needle sticking out of me, and stared at it in horrid fascination.

"We'll carry you to school," the officer said kindly.

"I'm afraid to move, it might go in deeper," I sobbed.

"I'll move you very, very gently," he said.

Cookie didn't seem to care. She stared out of the window. I hated her. Selma was worried but didn't know what to do and hovered over me like a helpless angel. Helga wept.

When we got to Bishops Stortford station, the handsome officer picked me up in slow motion. He walked with me draped over his arms along the tree-lined street, the silver needle sticking out of me straight in the air.

Though it wasn't the daring entrance on the arm of a handsome Yank I'd dreamed of, I enjoyed being carried to school by an American officer. Of course having a knitting needle sticking out of my middle wasn't exactly romantic, nothing like Miss Curzon wrapped in her officer's arms.

The other girls we passed stopped and stared. I pretended the Yank officer was my hero, maybe John Wayne, and I was Joan Fontaine. He had rescued me from the terrible German (Cookie) and was carrying me gently in his arms to the hospital. I hoped

the needle wouldn't fall out before I got to school. I'd feel a right fool. Curious girls trailed behind me all the way into the headmistress's office, where the soldier gently laid me down on a bench. Cookie, of course, disappeared.

I felt terribly important. Miss Pierce, the headmistress, sized up the situation immediately.

"Everyone to class," she said briskly, and the girls slid away whispering to each other, "What happened, how'd she get a knitting needle stuck in her?"

"Oh, how jolly," exclaimed Miss Palmer, the gym teacher-cum-first-aid assistant in her short gym tunic, who had been hastily summoned. My moment of importance, I knew, was over.

The kind officer and his friend, who hadn't said a word, melted away. I never learned their names. Without hesitation, Miss Palmer plucked out the needle. It made a little sucking sound as it let go of my skin. I yelped. She pulled up my gym tunic and blouse and I looked down. Blood oozed from a small hole. Miss Palmer wiped a little iodine on the faint hole and laughed. I thought she ought to be more serious in view of my near fatal accident. Suppose the needle had gone into my heart?

"D'you know something like this once happened to me?" she said chattily.

Shut up, I wanted to say, it's *my* show.

"I was climbing the wall bars in the gym and my gym teacher came up behind me, put her hands on my bottom and said, 'Push

up,' and as she pushed me up, three sharp pencils sticking up in her shirt pocket went into my behind."

Miss Palmer chortled gleefully. I couldn't have cared less about the pencils in her bum. I looked at her glumly. She should respect my case with dignity and not tell me jokes about being stabbed in her behind.

I recovered almost instantly and except for shock, fear, and fury with Cookie, felt quite well by the time school ended. The girls in class asked me lots of questions, how did it happen, who were those *divine* Yanks who'd carried me to school, and so on. I was very brave and offhand about it all. I felt a mixture of importance and awkwardness. I must have looked both dramatic and silly with a knitting needle sticking up out of me.

After school Helga, Selma and I got into the train for Great Chesterford. Cookie had disappeared and was staying out of my way, fortunately for her. Though it was an accident, I always thought of her as having personally stabbed me, and I never forgave her.

We were still riding the trains to school as the war was drawing to a close. The Allies were winning, slowly but surely. One beautiful day in May of 1944, I treated myself to a bunch of sweet-smelling violets sold by an old lady at the station. Once on the train I changed out of my uniform and into a pretty blue dress in the train lavatory. I wanted to celebrate the coming end

of the war by changing from my uniform to "civvies," as the soldiers would do when there was peace. In the train compartment I held the violets to my nose and drank in their sweet scent.

There were two Yanks in our carriage. The one next to me was a captain--the one opposite, next to Selma, a private. They acted like boys, cracking jokes and knuckles, and dancing in the aisles of the train. They were so playful. Yanks never seemed to work, but then we only saw them on trains. Perhaps it was they who flew in the bombers which passed overhead every day, on missions to Germany.

At the stop before we got off, we leaned out of the carriage window. The evening breeze riffled our hair across our faces. A group of eight Yanks on the platform crowded round our window. A tall captain said to me, "Where you going? Can I have one of your violets?"

"Here," I said, pulling out a delicate tendril with its heartbreakingly sweet smell and gave it to him. "Don't forget to water it."

He laughed. "Can you come to the dance in Cambridge Tuesday?"

"Our Daddy doesn't let us go dancing with Yanks," I said.

I couldn't even think of asking permission from Mr. Shapiro. The idea of going to a dance with Yanks was too delicious and too forbidden to even think of seriously. Just a dream.

The train began to move away, slowly. The Yanks walked

alongside the train until it began to pick up speed.

"See you in Tokyo," the tallest one called after us, saluting.

I felt a crushing sense of foreboding. These young men were soon all going to fight the Japanese. Some would be wounded, some taken prisoner, some killed. We'd all been laughing and joking as lightheartedly as if we'd been at a party and they were seeing us off. I had seen a lot of war films and I finally realized with a shock that these quiet, playful men and boys might be the heroes who ended up missing, wounded or dead.

We'd been seeing them off for the last and possibly greatest battle of the war somewhere in Japan, a place we hardly knew of.

21.

Mystery of the Oranges

"Mr. Shapiro has turned the big girls out of the Green Room again," Nurse said when we bounced in from school on Monday.

"What is it for this time?" I cried, throwing my satchel on the floor with a thump.

"Someone stole Marta's orange ration," Nurse said, her deep brown eyes sparkling as if she were happy. Fruit was rare. Oranges were even more rare. Young children had never seen a grapefruit or a banana. One such child given his first banana ate the skin and threw away the fruit. Damn Marta's oranges. Why had she left them in the Green Room? No one had ever stolen anything in the hostel before.

"How can we get homework done with no quiet place to study?" I said to Selma.

"I'm fed up with this too," she said. I was surprised. She was usually so placid.

"Come into my office," Mr. Shapiro said to me after supper. I followed him into the oak-lined study where we'd had such intimate conversations about the mysteries of life. Here was a totally different mystery.

"It's your duty as head girl to find out who stole Marta's oranges."

"*My* duty?" I said.

It seemed to me it was his duty. He was the warden and I

was just a fifteen-year-old girl. But I didn't argue. If I wanted to argue about anything, it would have been about why he kept taking away the Green Room, lately.

"I'll do my best," I said, leaving his study. I felt resentful but obligated to carry out his demand.

Selma, Helga and I went up to our bedroom and sat on our cots. I asked all the big girls if they had any idea who might be the thief.

"It might be Cookie," Selma said. "She's always up to mischief."

"But I think her father sends her money from Hong Kong," Helga said. "She could buy oranges, she wouldn't need to steal."

"If you can get them," I said. "I can't remember when I last had one. My mother can't even get them on the black market."

That evening I cornered Cookie, looked her in the eyes and said, "Tell me the truth, did you take Marta's oranges from the Green Room?"

"You're *meshuga*, crazy," Cookie said, tossing her head and stalking away on her long legs, her high-bridged nose in the air.

"I certainly didn't," Anita said, flushing red, insulted.

"Anita, I didn't even ask you," I said.

"No, but you stared at me. And you know my mother has no money. But I'm not a *ganef*," she said. "I never stole anything in my life."

"I believe you. Don't get upset with *me*. I'm just trying to

find the thief. Mr. Shapiro told me to. I don't like this job."

I had to believe them, but I wouldn't know how to recognize a lie if I heard one.

We went into the dining room to do our homework. Kids on duty were still cleaning off the tables. Other were running in and out. Mr. Shapiro entered the dining room and said, "Because of this theft, you're all on silence for the rest of the day. No one is allowed to speak until tomorrow and the Green Room is off limits."

Couldn't he see us struggling to study in the noise of the dining room.

I wondered how I was supposed to catch the thief if we were on silence and I couldn't ask any questions. For the first time, I thought Mr. Shapiro was not being logical.

Later in the evening he softened. "All right, you can talk, now. And you can use the Green Room."

But it was bedtime, too late.

On Sunday, when we usually slept a little later, Selma and a few girls came down late for breakfast. Mr. Shapiro scowled.

"From now on you have to get up at 7.30 on Sunday mornings and today you have to go to bed straight after supper," he said.

"Mr. Shapiro," I protested, "I have to finish my homework or I'll be punished in school."

"You'll just have to tell your teacher what happened."

"Why is he being so mean, lately?" I asked Selma as we went

up stairs. "I don't understand it, but there must be a reason."

That evening I did my homework by candlelight. We kept candles and matches upstairs in case a bomb destroyed our electricity. Selma struck a match and lit the candle. The girls' faces all looked ghostly in its flickering light.

"Is this enough light?" Selma asked.

"Not for my lazy right eye," I said. Mummy told me my left eye should have been covered in my childhood to make the lazy right eye work harder. I explained this to the girls.

"Why didn't she cover it, then?" Helga said.

"I don't know," I said. "I wish she had. Maybe then I wouldn't have to wear glasses for reading."

"It's not fair," Cookie said. "We get too many punishments."

"And they don't even make any sense. How does putting us on silence help find the thief?" Helga said.

"Mr. Shapiro doesn't practice what he preaches," Anita said heatedly. "He tells us to be calm and have patience but *he* loses his temper all the time, lately."

"Yes, he smacks the small children on the behind. He lines them up and puts them over his knee and slaps their bottoms with his slipper," Helga said.

"I'm astonished," I said. "I never saw him smack anyone."

"He spanked my little brother," Helga said.

I remembered that she had briefly mentioned that once before.

"Why?" I asked.

"When my brother got hungry at night, he and I used to go down to the kitchen and steal the cheese out of the mousetraps. Nurse couldn't understand how the cheese disappeared, but no mice were caught. One night she and Mr. Shapiro stood guard and caught us. He spanked Freddie. While he was bent over Mr. Shapiro's lap, Freddie bit his leg."

I couldn't help laughing, imagining dignified Mr. Shapiro yelping in pain as little Freddie's teeth sank into his thigh.

"I'll never, ever forgive Mr. Shapiro for that," Helga said.

She was such a quiet little thing I was surprised at the intensity of her anger. I'd forgotten she had a little brother. I suppose she was like a mother to him since their parents were in concentration camp--if they were still alive.

"Perhaps he's just fed up. I couldn't blame him, cooped up seven days a week with forty children," I said.

"Perhaps his mood will change now that Purim's coming," Selma said.

A week later the festival of Purim began. Mr. Shapiro would recite the *Megillah*, the story of Esther. I loved that story, so full of intrigue and murder and a happy ending as well. I hoped we would have as happy an ending with the orange mystery.

That night we were to hear the *Megillah*, have a fancy dress party, a Purim feast and a play. Marta strolled into the center

of the big girls' room. She wore a shirt tied up at her midriff and her pajamas were tied at the ankle to look oriental. She'd draped Woolworth beads over her hair, and a chiffon scarf covering all but her eyes served as a veil. She'd drawn black lines round her eyes like a Persian lady.

She twirled around gracefully, slapped her tambourine and said, "I am Vashti, Queen of all the Persians. But the king banished me because I wouldn't come before his drunken courtiers to show my beauty."

"You truly look beautiful," I said.

"Thank you," Marta said with a bow. "What are you going as, Selma?" she asked, though to me that was obvious.

"I'm beautiful Queen Esther, whom King Ahasuerus chose after he banished Vashti," Selma said. "How do I look?"

She turned slowly in front of us. She'd made a crown out of silver foil, and had borrowed a peignoir and high heels from Mrs. Shapiro.

"You look more like a fairy," Cookie said.

"Jealous?" Selma snapped back.

Anita said, "I am Mordechai, Esther's guardian. It was I who told Esther to keep her Judaism a secret when the king chose her from hundreds of beauteous women to be his new wife. . . "

". . .until the banquet, when Esther told the king that wicked Haman planned to kill her and all her people," Selma added.

"And I am that wicked Haman, hee, hee, hee," Cookie said, twirling the imaginary mustache of a villain. She wore a long bathrobe and a towel for a turban. She'd stuffed a pillow in her front to look fat. She brandished a cardboard sword and wore Haman's famous three-cornered hat. "I'm going to kill every Jew in Persia and that includes you, Esther."

Cookie feinted toward Selma with her sword.

I shuddered. History was repeating itself. Hitler, sounding just like Haman, wanted to rid the whole world of Jews. But there was no Esther to save us.

"I'm just going to be a handmaid to Queen Esther," Helga said, brown eyes wide, her timid voice a near whisper. She wore a long nightie held up with a gold belt at her childlike waist. Her long, frizzy hair, parted in the middle, hung down on either side of her face. She'd tied a ribbon across her forehead and made a bow at the back. Under one skinny arm, she carried a steel pot taken from the kitchen. With her apologetic face she really did look like a handmaiden.

"I suppose I'll have to be King Ahasuerus, ruler of the Persian Empire," I said, "It's the easiest costume."

I felt silly dressing up. Dressing up was for kids, not for a fifteen-year-old. I simply wore a long dressing gown, and like Cookie, wrapped a towel round my head for a turban.

Some of the small boys dressed up as King Ahasuerus wore crowns glued together with starch and water and carried swords

cut out of paper. Others came dressed as Mordechai, one hopping along on a cardboard horse with a painted-on face and reins.

Mr. Shapiro cheerfully read the *Megillah* in the common room. It could have been the same story as that of the Nazis. Instead of Haman's dastardly advisors, though, Hitler had Goebbels, Eichman and other sinister aides who helped plan the extermination of all Jews. Each time cruel Haman's name was read, we all banged, booed, stamped our feet and twirled our *greggors*. The noisemakers made a horrible grating sound and were deafening, but the small kids loved letting go.

All through the reading, I kept thinking of the mystery of the stolen oranges. Who could have taken them?

We trooped into the dining room, about ninety shoes clomping on the wooden floors. We washed hands, said the blessing, then had a smashing Purim dinner with chicken, roast potatoes and *chumantashen* in the shape of Haman's three cornered hat. I liked to bite off each corner of the pastry Mrs. Bramson had filled with a dab of rationed poppy seed or jam, then eat the inside. Before dessert we sang Purim songs. "I Had a Little Dreidl," was our favorite.

Nurse had gone off on her honeymoon for a few days. In the meantime, a temporary nurse, Miss Fox, took her place. Miss Fox was about nineteen, short and plump with a wide, serious face and steel-rimmed glasses. She'd dressed as Vashti. Mummy would have told her to peroxide her little mustache.

Miss Fox sat next to me at the Purim dinner. We found it easy to talk to each other. She was a German refugee and lived in a hostel in London for adult refugees who had no family.

"Would you like to visit me when you come to London?" she asked.

"I'd love to," I said.

"Here's my address," she said, slipping a piece of paper to me under the table. "Drop me a line when you're coming. You must come to tea. There's something I want to discuss with you."

I was bursting with curiosity. Why she was being so secretive, slipping me her address like a spy? What could she, a nineteen-year-old woman, want to talk about to me, a kid of fifteen?

"I'll let you know when I'm coming," I said, folding the slip of paper and putting it into my skirt pocket.

After dinner the big girls put on our play in the common room. We began with Mordechai's discovery of Haman's plot to kill all the Jews of Persia.

"Don't think you will escape because you are the king's favorite," Mordechai (Anita) thundered. "When he finds out you're Jewish you will die like all the other Jews in Persia."

"I will go to see the king and beg for our lives, and if I die, I die," Esther said, flinging her arms out.

No one was allowed to enter the king's courtyard on pain of death--unless he held out his scepter to the visitor.

Selma as Esther pantomimed fasting for three days, sending away Helga and imaginary servants laden with food "Go," she said imperiously. Then she pantomimed dressing in sumptuous clothes. Clutching her hand to her breast, her face somber, she approached the king's courtyard.

But the king (me), held out his scepter and said, "Approach, fair Esther. Be it half my kingdom, whatever you want, you shall have it."

Selma, as Esther, said, "Gracious Majesty, I invite you and Haman to a banquet."

At the banquet, we all lounged in royal dignity on two chairs each, set side by side, and a pillow. Cookie, as Haman said to the audience, "Hee, hee, I'm really in top favor with the king and queen. Get the gallows ready for that ungracious Jew, Mordechai, who refuses to bow to me, or to anyone but his own God."

Then Selma as Esther said to me, "Your Majesty, there is a wicked man who wants to kill me and all my people."

"Who is it?" I thundered, as the outraged king.

"Haman," Selma said, pointing dramatically at Cookie.

Cookie did a great job of quivering with fear and falling across Queen Esther's lap, clawing at Selma's dress. "Please, spare my life," she snivelled.

As king, I rushed into the supposed garden to calm down from my rage at Haman. I came back to find Haman clutching at Queen

Esther.

"What, he dares to try and seduce my wife even in my own house. Hang him on the gallows he prepared for Mordechai."

Then the king and queen, (Selma and I), embraced. Everyone cheered as Marta, Cookie, Helga, Anita, Selma and I took bows.

Then I thought, how odd. Marta, who had played Vashti, the victim in the Purim story, was the one who had lost her oranges; Cookie had dressed as Haman who planned to kill all the Jews and to steal their property. Like Haman, Cookie was a mischief-maker. Could she also be the thief? And I, head girl at the hostel, had played Ahasuerus the ruler.

Were our choices of roles coincidental?

The very next day I received another letter from Mummy:

> I'm happy to tell you that your Uncle Max is getting married to a lovely girl, and you are to be bridesmaid. Start asking for permission to come home during the Easter holidays.

"My uncle is getting married. I'm to be bridesmaid and I'm going to London," I yelled to everyone.

All the girls crowded round me. We put our arms round each others' waists in a circle and jumped up and down with excitement. "Mazal tov, mazal tov," the girls shouted.

"*Imyirtshe shem bay dir*, may it be your turn, soon," Selma said.

"Oh, Selma, don't be ridiculous, I'm only fifteen," I said. "I only hope Mr. Shapiro lets me go to London without a huge

argument. Perhaps if I find the thief, he won't make a fuss."

The next morning I asked the kids to stay in the dining room after breakfast. To my surprise, all sat quietly. They were a round-eyed innocent-looking lot.

"Someone stole Marta's oranges from the Green Room," I began, trying to look as strict as my headmistress. "I want that person to come to me by the end of the day. Or if you know who did it, please tell me before bedtime. We can't have people stealing in the hostel."

The day seemed one of endless waiting. Each time a girl came to speak to me, I hoped she'd come to confess. First Helga and then Norma came to speak to me. As they drew near, I dreaded that it might be to confess the theft. How awful I'd feel if the thief was someone I particularly liked. What would I do then? But neither of them said anything about oranges.

Cookie avoided me all day. So did Anita. If they were innocent, I couldn't blame them for being insulted. But Cookie was always playing cruel pranks and Anita always looked surly, as if she had done something wrong, even if she hadn't.

I doubted one of the little children would have stolen from the Green Room. They weren't allowed in there. And since it was off the kitchen where people passed almost all the time, they'd have been spotted almost immediately. It had to be one of the big girls, an inside job, as they said in my favorite mystery books.

I waited all day for someone to confess to me, but no one

came. I was so disappointed. I thought the culprit would feel so guilty she'd confess, but no such thing happened.

On the morning of visiting day I thought I'd try a trick. Before the visitors came I called a meeting.

"I know who the culprit is, and unless the person owns up by twelve o'clock, I shall show them up in front of all the visitors, and they'll be sent to Coventry. That means that you aren't allowed to speak to anyone and no one is allowed to speak to you for a month," I said.

The small children pressed around me asking,"Who do you think it is? Will they have to leave the hostel? What if they ate the oranges and can't give them back?"

I refused to answer their questions. It was an enormous bit of bluff. I hadn't the faintest idea who the culprit was. I suspected Cookie but had no proof. I'd persuaded myself that she had intentionally stabbed me with the knitting needle. Perhaps I just wanted to believe she was the thief to get my revenge.

Twelve o'clock came--nothing.

I questioned everyone separately. Desperate and humiliated I burst into Mr. Shapiro's study like Esther coming into the king's chamber.

He was, as usual, wearing his old tweed suit, quietly reading and puffing on his pipe. He looked at me with his dark eyes.

"Oh, it's no good," I said, throwing up my hands. "I've

called meetings and questioned everyone and I still don't know who stole the oranges. I've done all I could, I'm sorry, I can't find the culprit."

To my surprise he said, "Well, I was going to give you back the Green Room after a time, anyway."

"Thank you so much, it's very nice of you," I said. I was being sarcastic, but he didn't realize it. I turned to leave.

"Gilda."

"Yes?" I turned back. It was the first time he'd called me by my name. A little thrill ran through me.

"I think it's Cookie."

"So do I. But she won't own up and we have no proof."

"No. Well I don't see what more we can do. I'll let you have the Green Room back today," he said.

"Thanks," I said. I felt flattered he'd confided in me as if I were a grownup. I felt we'd been, for a moment, very close.

Before giving up entirely, I decided to try one last experiment. I wouldn't tell anyone about it though, in case it failed. I was beginning to feel like a fool.

I knew that detectives always searched the houses of people suspected of theft. I decided to search all the children's rooms for signs of the oranges. Perhaps they hadn't yet been eaten.

I carried out my detective work secretly. For two hours I searched the floors, beds, chests and wardrobes of all the seven bedrooms. In the last room, reserved for the littlest boys, I

spied a tiny piece of orange peel under one of the beds. The peel was curled up, dried out and turning brown.

The little boy who slept in this bed had just come to the hostel. Nurse had told me about him the previous Friday. Peter was six. His entire family had been murdered by the Nazis. He was absolutely alone in the world.

I found Peter in the garden. I took him by the hand and said, "Peter, let's go and look at the fish in the pond."

"Don't want go," he said in Yiddish and tried to pull his hand away from mine. "You take me away."

He was a small, thin boy. I knew how it felt to be six and all alone in an orphanage.

"Don't be afraid," I said softly.

We came to the bench near the pond and sat down. He hung his head and looked at his feet. He seemed about to cry.

"Peter," I said, "did you find some oranges and eat them?"

"Mr. Shapiro will beat me very hard?" he asked.

"No, he won't, I promise," I said. "Only you must promise me not to take anyone else's food again. Are you hungry?"

"I'm not hungry now but I was hungry for a long time. I can't sleep at night. I have bad dreams. One night I thought my Mama called me to the kitchen. She wasn't there so I looked in the Green Room. She wasn't there either. I looked for her in all the cupboards and saw the oranges. My Mama used to give me oranges. I thought she left them there for me."

"The oranges belonged to Marta. Perhaps if you had asked her, she might have given you a piece. You mustn't take someone else's food or sweets again. Promise?"

"I promise," Peter said.

I gave him a hug. He nestled in my arms a long time, tears running down his face. Then he wiped them away and ran off.

The visitors began arriving, among them Mrs. Rozenfeld. As usual her clothes were beautifully simple and expensive. They reminded me of Aunt Regina. Mrs. Rozenfeld walked elegantly like a cat, one foot in front of the other. I noticed film stars and upper class girls at school walked like cats. I wondered if I could walk that way without falling on my nose if I practiced.

"Are you going home during the Easter school holidays?" she asked.

"I really hope so. My uncle's getting married and I'm going to be bridesmaid."

"Oh, how lovely, *mazaltov*," she said. "You certainly *must* go." She added, "Your mother can phone me for permission."

"Oh thank you, Mrs. Rozenfeld," I said fervently. All I had to do was to get Mr. Shapiro's permission. I didn't *need* it, but if I didn't ask for it, he'd be offended. He might suspend tutoring me or find some other way to punish me. He might close the Green Room again.

The hostel was bustling. Kids were running around stamping their feet, shouting to each other, singing songs loudly and

slamming doors.

"How *can* you study with all this noise?" Mrs. Rozenfeld asked, as she had on her last visit.

"Well we're supposed to have the Green Room to study in but it's often taken away as punishment. We haven't had it on and off for a week because someone stole Marta's oranges."

"It's hard luck for all of you to suffer for one child," she said in her husky voice.

It was so wonderful to find someone sympathetic like Mrs. Rozenfeld. I wanted to throw my arms around her and weep into her fur collar. I felt disloyal to Mr. Shapiro for mentioning the Green Room to Mrs. Rozenfeld but I was also tired of trying to study with all the noise going on. He gave me so much support with my education but put up such obstacles for those of us who needed a quiet place to study.

I smiled and said a polite goodbye to Mrs. Rozenfeld.

I looked around for Hans, but Norma's brother hadn't come this Sunday. I missed his tall, blond presence, his teasing smile. Silly to get soppy over another girl's brother, especially one much older than me. He had just been nice giving me a kiss on the cheek on my fifteenth birthday. Still. . .

After the visitors left and we'd had supper, I went to Mr. Shapiro's study. I knocked on his door, my heart beating.

"May I go home during the Easter holidays?" I asked.

"No," he said. No explanation, nothing.

"Mr. Shapiro," I said. "Why is there such a problem every time I ask your permission to go home? Mrs. Rozenfeld always gives me permission, why don't you?"

His head was swathed in smoke, so I could hardly see him in the dark, oak-panelled room.

"You have to realize," he said, "that of forty children here, only you have parents to go home to. I think it upsets all the other children when you visit your family. Also, when you're away, someone else has to do your duties. Do you realize that every day girls bring in the milk churn, peel twenty pounds of potatoes, set and clear the table, wash the dishes, while you and the other high school girls do none of these duties?"

"I'm sorry that because we four girls go to high school and travel two hours a day and have three hours' homework, we can't also do the duties. And just because I *do* have parents and the others don't, I don't think I should be punished for it. My uncle is getting married and I'm to be bridesmaid, so I have to go to London."

The cloud of smoke had dispersed and I saw him clearly, even the little blood spot in his left eye--a mere man, after all.

"If you go home for more than seven days during the Easter holidays, I'll write a formal note of protest to Mrs. Rozenfeld. You must be here to do your share of the duties. It's not fair for all the other children to do your work while you're off in London."

"But my uncle's getting married," I protested.

"You'd still be getting out of your duties."

I was incensed. I had only asked his permission out of courtesy.

"Suppose I told you I found out who stole the oranges?" I said.

"You did? he said, sitting bolt upright in his chair.

"If I tell you, I ask you to promise two things," I said, my heart beating madly. I felt like Esther, at great risk, asking favors from the king.

"You're in no position to extract promises from me," he said.

I remained silent, looking at him.

"Well, well. What promises do you want?" he said finally.

"The first is that you don't take the Green Room away from us ever again. The second is that you don't punish the little boy who took the oranges. There's a good reason for his stealing them and he's too recently orphaned to suffer any more."

Mr. Shapiro heard me out. I told him about Peter. He agreed not to take the Green Room away again. He promised not to punish Peter and to find some oranges to replace Marta's. He said he had to think about me going to London.

I thanked him and left the room.

I rushed upstairs to the big girls' room and shouted out, "Whoopee."

"What happened?" the girls asked.

I told them. They burst into cheers and slapped me on the back.

When I came home from school next day, Cookie held up a letter. I rushed at it.

"Is it from Mummy?"

Even though Mummy's writing was getting worse and worse, Cookie could recognize her scribble.

"Catch me if you can," she taunted. She danced around and wouldn't let me have the letter. I leapt on her, wrestled her to the ground, and panting, snatched it from her. She kicked me.

Yes. It was from Mummy.

When I read the first words, "Hip hip," I knew I could go home. That is, I had Mrs. Rozenfeld's permission. I still had to get Mr. Shapiro's. I danced around the room in delight.

That evening Mr. Shapiro burst into the Green Room and said, "Write to the committee and if they give you permission to go, there's nothing I can do about it. However you can't stay eight days, you can only stay seven."

Even though he was making me come back a day earlier than Mrs. Rozenfeld had allowed, I didn't protest. If I fought him on this, I'd lose his friendship. After all he'd helped my schooling improve greatly.

I immediately wrote to Mummy.

Chapter 22

Uncle Max's Wedding

In Liverpool Street Station I slowly circled in one spot, head thrown back, gazing up at the high glass, iron-girdered roof. I crossed my eyes as I looked at the roof windows taped to protect us from flying glass. My eyes felt comfortable crossed, resting my left eye, which did all the work of my lazy right eye. The circling made me dizzy, though, so I stopped and just stared upward.

Birds that were perched on the iron roof supports swooped from one girder to another. The station had its own music: the birds twittering as orchestra, the puffing and shunting black monster trains, the clang of carriages coupling, the slamming of train doors, the hooting, the station-master's shrill whistles, the voices of passengers calling excitedly to one another, "Hallo darling," or,"Goodbye sweetheart,"--all of it echoing in discordant harmony.

Crowds of soldiers, sailors, blue-uniformed airforce men, and their girlfriends, wives, and mothers rushed back and forth around me, colliding in hugs and kisses, melting hellos or wrenching goodbyes. I felt delirious with joy. I was home. Grimy, exciting East London was paradise.

No one, as usual, met me.

I pushed my bike toward the station exit. A few high school children like me milled around. Perhaps they'd come home from

evacuation for the summer holidays. Or perhaps they'd never left London. Some evacuees had returned home to London during the "phony war" in 1939 when no bombs dropped. Some never left again, despite the heavy bombing which began in 1940.

As soon as I left the station, the tumult of Bishopsgate engulfed me once more. The deafening noise from busses and taxis shouted London's rowdy welcome at me. The newspaper men outside the station shouted, "Getcha *Evenin' News*. Big raid last night kills 'undreds."

What if my house had been bombed, the house demolished, my parents killed? I wheeled my bike homeward along rubble from the bombed-out buildings of the latest raid. I blithely passed tenements, blocks of flats, some shattered and still smoking, some eyeless without windows. I didn't care. I was home.

Over a shop whose windows were missing, a large sign read, "Shattered but not shuttered. Sale on damaged goods." Its windows lay in shards on the street. A one-armed mannequin stood in the shop front, like a wounded soldier, clad in a shrapnel-torn dress and fur coat. Another sign in the window read, "THE JERRIES CAN'T SHUT US DOWN. STILL OPEN FOR BUSINESS. FIGHT BACK."

An elegant woman stretched her hand through the glassless window and stroked the fur coat. I imagined her tearing it off the model and running away with it, but she went into the shop. The door was still intact, and its doorbell tinkled as she

entered.

"*Good* morning, Madam," I heard a cheerful voice sing out. I may have hated our anti-semitic politicians for their policies against Israel but how I admired the guts of the British.

Outside a still smoking apartment house, two aproned old women, feet apart, sat in the street on wooden boxes. They wore scarves tied under their chins the way the Queen wore hers when she visited the East End after a heavy raid. The Queen would comfort the bereaved and her photograph was often in the newspaper.

The two gray-haired women sat in the cool air calmly peeling potatoes, a tin basin of water between them. "Put more wood on the fire, Liz," said the older woman. Pieces of wood from bombed-out houses lay around and Liz threw them on the fire. I couldn't believe I was seeing an old pot atop a fire in the middle of the street. Liz plopped in a peeled potato. Opposite the women, workmen were knocking in wooden posts about three feet apart and winding wire around. They were encircling a huge crater.

I stopped for a shopkeeper who was calmly sweeping shards of glass from his shattered shop window into the gutter.

"Mornin'" he said cheerfully.

"Good morning to you," I said, feeling like a real Londoner.

My heart beat with excitement at the prospect of reaching home, throwing myself into Mummy's arms and getting a rough hug

and stubbly kiss from Daddy, silent and deaf, but grinning, his dark eyes shining.

So many houses lay in ruins. I was afraid ours had been bombed and Mummy hadn't told me. I finally came to our street, Vallance Road, and saw that the shop and house, though shabby, were still standing. I gave a big sigh of relief. The old sign "Alf's Ladies' and Gentlemen's Hairdressing," though lop-sided, still hung over the shop window. The red, white and blue barber pole still twirled lazily overhead. The windows upstairs were blasted out and covered with nailed plywood boards. Although the shop door was locked and the brown shutters were up over the shop windows, the side entrance to the house was, as usual, unlocked. I ran inside and shouted, "Hello, I'm home."

The house was empty and silent. No one was home to greet me after all this time away. Tears sprang to my eyes. I wandered into the kitchen, and peered into the pantry. There was nothing to eat but a tin of sardines and half a loaf of bread. I tramped up the wooden stairs and pinged on the piano listlessly. I pulled open the drawers of the sideboard and found the old kaleidoscope whose brilliant colors and changing patterns had thrilled me as a child. I held it up to the light, but because the windows were boarded up, I couldn't see its wonderful color formations.

Finally, I heard the front door downstairs slam and ran down, colliding with Daddy who gave me his gruff hallo and a bristly kiss. He held two heavy carrier bags. He was slight but

strong, with the confidence of the light-weight champion boxer he'd been at the East London Jewish Club in his youth.

"Yer Uncle Sam's seriously ill and Booba asked Mum to come and help her in the shop."

So Booba was speaking to Mummy again. She treated Mummy with contempt but Mummy still ran to her whenever called. With Uncle Max in the army and Uncle Sam in hospital, Booba needed help. But Aunty Regina would never work in a grocery shop; she was too posh. She had her own job in Devere Imported Laces. I'd been there once to visit Aunty Regina and loved the rainbow of laces stacked in bolts from floor to ceiling. Mummy, but never Regina, was expected to close her shop to help Booba.

"Want a cuppa?" Dad said.

I nodded and smiled. I wished he wasn't deaf so we could speak like other fathers and daughters. It was difficult to have a conversation with him when I had to shout all the time. Mummy did it, but I couldn't. She often shouted at him in anger, too. She was always angry with him, maybe because she didn't love him. Booba insisted they marry. "You're twenty-four, soon you'll be an old maid. He'll always make a living. You'll never be hungry."

Daddy was a first class barber. It was supposed to be a reliable trade, although before the war there was often no business on weekdays. Daddy would stand on the doorstep muttering ferociously to himself, "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you,

. . . ." until a customer arrived. This language didn't faze the customer. Everyone in the gentile East End spoke this way. I supposed Daddy was angry and frustrated when no customers came in. I loved to recall Friday and Saturday nights when the place came alive: Daddy would whip out hot towels, swish his shaving brush in the Queen Mary shaving mug, shave half a dozen men, and give smart haircuts. The waiting men would smoke or read girlie magazines, while the women would chat as Mummy did their hair.

After work late at night, Daddy would massage Mummy's swollen ankles and hold her while she stretched her arms up in the air. Then he'd give an embarrassed smile, not used to her favoring him. Sundays was his 'artistic day,' when he went to a museum, drew or painted, or read illustrated nature books. He lacked formal school training but read voraciously and indiscriminately: while he ate, in the lavatory, between customers. He was the adventurer, he tried new things, visiting the museums, drawing, writing doggerel, buying pretty trinkets for the shop, going to dog races. Mummy stuck to the old. She saved, he spent. When Mummy shouted at him for this, he stared at her or went to sleep. I liked his lifestyle better but dared not say so.

Daddy had brought home Peak Frean biscuits, which he put in a saucer. We took our tea and biscuits and sat companionably by the fire, neither of us talking. There were only two channels on the wireless. The BBC was playing *Aida* which Mummy had taught me

to love.

Mummy finally came home breathless from Booba's. We kissed and cuddled. Since I'd been at the hostel, Mummy had become so warm and friendly. Was it because I was out of her way? Or was it because I was older and could take care of myself? In her letters and during the few times we met, she treated me more like a sister or friend than a daughter. She'd laugh with me over a male customer who had tried to make love to her, or a passerby whose slip was showing. It made me happy. I'd always wanted her to love me.

That night the air-raid siren wailed up and down like a monstrous baby crying. We heard the buzz of German aeroplanes.

"Why do their 'planes buzz and ours don't?" I asked Daddy.

"Our planes are built better," he said.

"Hurry up, get under the stairs," Mummy said.

We both crouched down on the coal as before. Dad went to bed, taking his chances. At least he wouldn't hear anything. There was a terrible thump, the whole house shook, and then we heard a roar as the bomb exploded. Somewhere glass shattered, sounding strangely beautiful and tinkling. Despite thinking this my body began to shake.

"They're bombing the docks again," Mummy said.

The bombing went on and on, deafening explosions followed by awful silences. We heard the ack-ack gunners trying to hit the German bombers. I was afraid a bomb would drop on us. We would

all be killed instantly or else our arms, legs, or backs broken. Or the whole house would crumble on us and we'd be buried alive under the wreckage. No one would find us for days, maybe not until we'd died of thirst. I'd read about a boy of eight buried for seven days under a pub in Paris. When he was finally rescued, he was dead drunk but smiling.

Don't let me lose an arm, I prayed to God, not now. It would look awful at the wedding. Losing an arm or leg would be worse than dying, I thought.

"Perhaps we should go to the underground," I said.

"No fear. You wouldn't catch me down there sleeping with hundreds of other people on the platforms and tracks. It's bedlam down there. They piss in a pail, they play music and entertain each other, eat and drink. I'd rather die in bed." Mummy said.

After what seemed like hours, a thin one-note wail sounded the all clear.

"Just when I thought they'd stopped bombing London, the Jerries started again," Mummy grumbled. "We're so close to winning the war, yet we could get killed by the last bomb."

We went outside to see if any houses on our street had been hit. Eastward, toward the docks, the whole sky was flaming red, the fire both frightening and beautiful. I felt the warmth even from that distance. I was always afraid of being burned, more so now. I had to remind myself that there would soon be a wedding to enjoy. In the midst of death there was life.

The big day arrived. Uncle Max came home on seven days' leave. We all kissed and hugged him. His khaki uniform was rough against my skin.

"You look so handsome, Uncle Max," I said.

He smiled and kissed me, his khaki uniform rough against my skin. I was so proud of him. This was my brave uncle who had taken me to the Cable Street Battle before the war. I was only a child, seven, and Uncle Max was only seventeen, then. Now I was fifteen and he was twenty-five, tall, with dark brown eyes, wavy hair and a dimple in his chin. This was one Tommy who was handsome, in spite of his coarse khakis.

Earlier that year he was stationed near the hostel for a while, at Guilford. We didn't tell anyone in the family but one day I played hookey and took a train to his base. We had tea in the canteen. He showed me the intelligence tests he gave recruits. "Half of them are illiterate," he said. Then he sat me on the bar of his bicycle and rode me to the station. "Sylvia would never do this," he said, and I felt a little thrill. He was still my uncle.

The next day he came over to our house for tea. He was the only one of the family who would visit us. After spending an hour with us, he was off to see his fiancee Sylvia. I wished I

had a boyfriend like him.

For the first time in years I went to Booba's home. She was cool, as always, but allowed me to kiss her cheek. Zada, older and quieter, gave me a kiss but didn't hug me as he used to. Aunt Regina and her new husband, Raphael, were visiting Booba. Aunt Regina's son from Uncle Adrian, Jeremy, was with them.

The new grandchild was now the center of attention. He was four years old, a black-haired, bright-eyed little boy, bubbly and chattering. Everyone thought he was adorable. I felt madly jealous. I'd been here long before him, but I'd been away for five years, and he'd taken my place. I wanted to strangle his fat little neck.

I would have hated him, except that he looked exactly like his dead father, and I'd been fond of Uncle Adrian. Raphael, my aunt's new husband was much older and less friendly to me than Adrian had been. I was surprised he accepted Aunt Regina's child. But Jeremy didn't live with them. He lived with Adrian's mother and Aunt Regina saw him only on weekends.

Raphael, I couldn't call him uncle, was short but elegant, a little like Claude Rains. He drove up in a gleaming Bentley, which stood out like a luxury liner in the dusty slums of the East End. He parked half-on half-off the pavement outside Booba's shop. Uncle Max said, "Raphael's eyesight is bad but he's too vain to wear glasses. He likes to drive, mainly on the pavement."

Almost no one had a car in England, especially during the war. And if they had a car they couldn't get petrol. But Raphael was rich. He could have anything he wanted, including Aunt Regina. Now that she had money from her first husband's death, Raphael's family grudgingly accepted her. They did not welcome her, though, because she had come from a working-class family. Her face was a little wry when she told me that.

The day of Uncle Max's wedding came. Mummy wore a green satin beaded suit with green satin shoes. I wore a white chiffon dress and on my head a white circlet of flowers. Dad wore a good suit he'd hired from Moss Bros. The wedding was at the posh Murray's Club on Beak Street in the West End. In our finest clothes, Mummy, Daddy and I took a bus to the wedding hall. Everyone on the bus stared at us.

We rode on the top of the bus looking at the stone faces on the first floor of the buildings we passed. East End streets were so narrow that had I put my hand outside the bus, I could have touched those stone faces.

"In peacetime Uncle Max would have had the ceremony first at the Beehive Lane synagogue, and then gone on to the reception at Murray's Club," Mummy told me on the bus.

"But because of the war, there's no transportation to take the guests from the synagogue to Murray's Club. So they carried the *chuppa*, the bridal canopy, from the synagogue to the Beak Street Club and set it down right in the middle of the ballroom."

I tried to imagine it.

"You should have seen weddings before the war," Mummy said as the bus jogged along. "Usually at a Jewish wedding, they served the guests lunch, then everyone hung around chatting until tea-time, when we'd be served tea and cakes. Finally they held the ceremony. After the bride and groom were married, there was dinner and dancing. Since the war, they've cut out the lunch and tea, so today there'll be only dinner and dancing."

"Good gracious, a whole day and night for the wedding?" I said. "The bride and groom must have been exhausted. And it must have cost a fortune."

"And the bride had to pay for all of it. That's why the bride had to have *nadn*, a dowry. She also had to buy most of the household goods. And there was no installment plan then."

"No use any man expecting me to have *nadn*," I said.

"You're right. Whoever marries you can't expect anything from us. But if you marry one of those religious men, he'll expect a fortune. They all do."

"I don't think so," I said, though I didn't really know. All Mummy saw in religious people was the negative. She had no use for the history or spiritual or festive parts of it.

I loved the feel of my bridesmaid dress swishing around my ankles. I looked like a real grown up in it. Mummy had somehow found me silk stockings and I wore my high-heeled shoes. Used to wearing thick brogues for school every day, I still wobbled a

little in them. She put a little lipstick on me, exclaimed as usual, "You're so pale and skinny," then dabbed the faintest touch of Evening in Paris rouge on my cheeks. She shampooed and set my curly hair in soft waves with curls at the nape.

"Hello, pussycat," exclaimed Aunty Regina when I entered the club.

I ran to hug her but she held me by the shoulders, put her cheek to mine and kissed the air. I'd seen rich women in films kiss like that.

"How grownup you look, quite the young lady," she said.

I wished she'd hugged and kissed me the way she used to when I was little, but I supposed she didn't want me to disturb her hair or makeup. She wore a long, pale blue lace dress. The color matched her eyes exactly. She was strikingly tall and slender and carried her smooth blonde head high, like a princess. Her silver shoes matched a silver handbag. A white mink stole hung over her shoulders. She smelled, as usual, expensive and exotic. A huge, new diamond glittered on her finger.

Raphael's dark hair was slicked back with a side part. He wore a thin mustache, his dark eyes alert. In his perfectly tailored tails, he moved with the ease of the very rich. His bow tie, shirt and cuffs were made more brilliantly white by the gold and ruby cufflinks and the ruby stud in his shirt. Aunty Regina seemed deliriously happy, her blue eyes dancing. I wondered if she really loved Raphael or had married him for his money. I

wondered also if Aunt Regina ever thought of Uncle Adrian. I imagined my dead uncle Adrian as a long, elegant skeleton in his coffin. The guests were crowding around Sylvia and Uncle Max. Uncle Max, a tall, elegant bridegroom, grinned from ear to ear like an excited schoolboy. His hair was slicked back with Brylcreem and he looked dashing in tails and white tie. He wore a little horseshoe of dried flowers in his left lapel, as was the custom.

"Sylvia, this is my niece, Gilda," he said to his fiancee.

"How do you do?" she said, offering me a cool, limp hand. My new aunt-to-be was girlish and curvy. I was glad she hadn't worn a plain suit or dress with a little hat like many wartime brides. Servicewomen often wore their drab uniforms at their weddings. Sylvia's was a real pre-war wedding dress, as beautiful and elegant as Aunty Regina's had been, though Aunt Regina's dress had been somewhat severe. Sylvia's white satin gown had short puff sleeves and pearl beading across the bodice and sleeves. Aunt Regina had worn a pearl tiara on her smooth blonde head, while Sylvia wore a single white rose with a tiny veil on her long, dark curls. I couldn't imagine the two women as friends.

The rabbi conducted the marriage ceremony under the *chuppa*. Sylvia's mother had just lifted her veil and given her daughter the wine to drink from the silver goblet, when I heard a stamp and the tinkle of broken glass. Uncle Max had smashed the

wineglass which symbolized the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, to be remembered even at the height of joy. Then "Mazaltov," rang out from all the people in the hall and the band struck up with "*Choson, Kallah Mazaltov*," congratulations to the bride and groom.

Uncle Max bent Sylvia back, his black tails making him look like a black swan leaning over a white swan, and kissed her for so long I was afraid she would suffocate. How could anyone hold their breath for that long?

My new aunt finally stood up panting, flushed and radiant. Crowds of people pressed around and wished them mazaltov. I could see they were so much in love as they stared like fools into each other's eyes for ages and ages, as if they were all alone.

I felt a pang of jealousy. He was *my* uncle, almost like the brother I never had. He'd tease me whenever I visited Booba's shop, and he even let me ride on the handlebar of his bicycle, something Sylvia had never done. She was going to take him away forever and he would never tease me or notice me again.

I kissed her smooth cheek, too, then kissed Uncle Max, smelling his tangy cheek for perhaps the last time.

After a while, Booba pushed Zada, Uncle Max and Sylvia, Uncle Sam, Aunt Regina and Raphael into a taxi, and they drove to the famous photographer, Boris. I was surprised they hadn't taken Mummy or me as well, since I was bridesmaid and Mummy was Uncle Max's sister. Booba must have been still angry with Mummy

after all this time. I saw Mummy watch them leave, her eyes dark. I went to her and held her hand.

"Your Booba can be so cruel," Mummy said quietly, tears in her eyes.

"Let's go to the ladies' room," I said.

Inside she sobbed a little, then powdered her nose and put fresh lipstick on her full mouth. "I even have an unfashionable mouth," she said, peering into the mirror. "Everyone these days has a thin mouth."

"I think your mouth is beautiful," I said, but she didn't answer. Tears welled in her eyes again.

"My baby brother," she said, "and I won't be in the photos." I may have admired my grandmother at times, but I didn't like her. She was cruel to my mother and showered attention on Aunt Regina.

"It's simple," Mummy said, after she'd dried her eyes again, "Booba loves beautiful things and Aunt Regina is beautiful. Booba loves rich people and now Aunt Regina is rich. But she made me marry a poor man."

An hour later the family came back for the dinner and dancing. Booba acted as if nothing unusual had happened. The food was simple: soup, fish and chicken. At Aunt Regina's wedding to Uncle Adrian there had been seven courses, dozens of wines and champagne; but wartime weddings were much more modest.

Uncle Max and Aunt Sylvia went out onto the dance floor

alone. As they danced cheek to cheek, he held her closely but gently, as if she were precious. She put her arm around his neck as if he belonged to her. Their bodies were pressed as closely together as if they were one. "And a man shall leave his parents and cleave to his wife," I remembered reading somewhere in the Torah. Everyone clapped as they circled the floor, then gradually other couples joined them. The band played the latest songs, at first slow, dreamy waltzes, then "In the Mood."

"They're spending the rest of his seven-day leave at the Cumberland Hotel on Park Avenue," I heard Booba say proudly to a guest.

That must have been a gift, perhaps from Aunt Sylvia's father, who had a chain of clothing stores. I knew Uncle Max couldn't afford such a fancy hotel. I doubted Booba would have given them such a gift, even if she could. She was notoriously tight with money, except when it came to her favorite, Regina. Daddy claimed she'd walked off with the 400 pounds sterling in gifts at his and Mummy's wedding. "The bitch," he'd added.

My favorite person, Zada, was sitting and smoking a Turkish cigarette after dinner. Looking at his great broad chest made me want to run and nestle in his lap, lean against him and feel him rub his stubble against my tender skin, as he used to when I was five. But I was too old for that, too old for any affectionate squeezes and kisses. And being evacuated for nearly six years, I was almost like a stranger.

I got a kiss on the cheek from each relative and "*mirtza shem ba dir*," with God's will may you too, marry soon. That was it. No questions about my life away from home.

I wondered if my new Aunt Sylvia would be friendly or exclude Mummy, Daddy and me, as the rest of the family had. Booba had only invited us to the wedding, because Mummy was Uncle Max's sister. Max probably had insisted on it. He had always fought for justice.

After the wedding, Mummy said to Daddy, "Did you have to . . . ?" and I knew she was again reproaching him for some fault in his behavior. There was only one thing she praised him for: "He takes care of me that I don't have another baby," she often said.

It must be sad, I thought, for Mummy to live with someone she didn't love. And though I loved her, Mummy didn't seem to love me either. As with Daddy, she saw only my faults. Of course her own mother saw only Mummy's faults. Not having been loved, it must have been difficult for Mummy to love other people.

Just as I left I looked back and saw Uncle Max gazing softly into Sylvia's eyes and she into his and I knew they'd be lovers forever.

Chapter 23

After the Wedding

The morning after the wedding, I telephoned Miss Fox.

"Can you come to tea today?" she said in her soft, almost toneless voice. How mysterious she'd been at the hostel while filling in for Nurse's absence. What could she want to discuss with me?

I went by tube to Golders Green, nicknamed Goldberg's Green, because many Jewish refugees had settled there during the war. I walked to the address Miss Fox gave me. Her mock Tudor house was furnished plainly but comfortably, more so than any hostel. I wondered whose house it was. Miss Fox had said she lived in the working refugee hostel, but this was a private home and we were alone.

She passed me a delicate fluted teacup and saucer, certainly not hostel china. I hoped I wouldn't drop it. She poured tea from a china teapot which matched the tea set. "Milk, sugar?" she asked, with a face totally devoid of humor.

"Just milk, please."

She poured the milk ceremoniously, silently, then passed me a small plate for cake. Cake was a rarity during the war. How had she got it? I held the cup of tea in my right hand and balanced the cake plate on my knee. Miss Fox cleared her throat and shifted in her seat.

"I would like you to provide proof of conditions in the

hostel in Great Chesterford," she began.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I want you to write down what is going on with the Green Room, and why it is constantly being taken away from you. I want you to also write about all the duties that the children have, and the difficulties you have in getting Mr. Shapiro's permission to go home. Will you write all this down with a carbon copy for yourself and send it to me?"

She wanted me to spy on Mr. Shapiro. I was astonished at her request but I said,"Yes, of course." I had no intention of doing what she asked but didn't know how to say no. She was so intense, like an angry mouse, with her little whiskers. What business was it of hers what happened in our hostel? She'd only been a temporary nurse there. Perhaps she'd been asked to spy on Mr. Shapiro herself.

Mr. Shapiro had taught us in *Perek*, Ethics of the Fathers, that "Courtiers" always wanted something from you. Miss Fox must have been helping someone who wanted Mr. Shapiro out of the White House. But they weren't going to get my help. Although we'd had our run-ins, I just couldn't report him. After all he'd done for me, my loyalty was with Mr. Shapiro, not Miss Fox.

I thanked her for the tea and we shook hands goodbye. I felt angry that she wanted to use me to discredit someone I respected. I never wrote to her or heard from her until years later. But I found, long after, that she got her way without me.

At home I cleaned the house in the morning while Mummy worked in Booba's shop. Saturday came. Though Booba closed her grocery shop on Saturday, Mummy and Daddy's stayed open. A friend of Mummy's, Bill, dropped in for a haircut. After Dad gave him his haircut, Mummy called him into the kitchen for a cup of tea.

He was chatting to Mummy when she said to me, "I want you to go and see Uncle Sam in the Mildmay Mission Hospital. Here's some money for the bus and to buy flowers."

She held out two pounds.

"I'm sorry Mummy but it's Saturday, Shabbat."

Mummy didn't realize that I had begun to take my religious views seriously, that I was now an observant Jew. The Torah said that God had created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, and that we must do likewise. On the Sabbath we prayed, learned Torah, spent time with the family and rested. We were forbidden to work, which included doing any kind of business or having anyone work for us. Paying for the bus and for flowers were forms of business. Riding a bus required someone worked for me. I felt awkward. I wanted to please Mummy, but I couldn't break the laws of the Torah.

"Mummy, can I please visit Uncle Sam without buying flowers? Or go another day?"

"What nonsense is this?" Her voice rose, her face flushed crimson with anger. She pointed and shook her forefinger at me.

"You know what'll happen if you become religious? Your

education will be wasted, you'll marry a poor man, and you'll always have a big belly."

I felt embarrassed that we were arguing in front of Bill, but he merely smiled and calmly sipped his tea.

"I *want* a lot of children, Mummy."

"It's disgusting to have a big belly."

"I don't want my child to be an only child like me. I'll be perfectly happy to walk to the hospital to see Uncle Sam."

"Walk? It's two miles. Take a bus."

"Two miles isn't far to walk. I don't ride on Shabbat."

"Not ride? For heaven's sake, why not?"

"It's using gas and electricity and machinery."

"Well someone else is driving the bus, not you, you idiot."

"Exactly. I can't work nor make someone do work for me on Shabbat. I'd also have to pay the fare and that's a form of business. We stop all business on Shabbat."

"We? We? I sent you to a Jewish place in the country for this aggravation? You won't get me to stop working on a Saturday for some ridiculous religious notions. Saturday's my busiest day. And you won't spend money either? What rubbish. Well I'll have to send Bill with you. He can show you the way and buy the flowers."

She looked me up and down then pointed at my legs triumphantly.

"Look at your stockings, you've got ladders in both of them.

You can't visit your Uncle Sam with torn stockings. He hasn't seen you for years. You'll have to go out and buy new ones."

I sighed. I so much wanted to keep Shabbat, but it meant endless arguments with Mummy. I couldn't bear her to be cross with me, especially since she'd been so nice when I arrived home. I'd be going back to the hostel shortly and didn't want to leave on bad terms.

I gingerly took the two pounds she held out, feeling guilty at even touching the money, and went down the street to buy stockings. I was very unhappy. The peaceful feeling of Shabbat was ruined.

"That's a good girl," Mummy said when I came back.

I didn't feel like a good girl. The Torah said you were to honor your father and mother, but it also said no work or business was to be done on the Sabbath. Should I honor my parents and break Shabbat or disobey my parents and keep Shabbat? Though I knew in my heart what was right, I just couldn't bear fighting with Mummy. She never gave up until she got her way.

"Here, Bill, here's money for flowers. My stupid daughter won't touch money on her precious sabbath," Mummy said, even though she had just forced me to buy the stockings.

"Do me a favor and go with her to the hospital and buy some flowers for Sam please."

"Be glad to," Bill said, putting down his teacup. He was a gentile, about thirty, dark-haired and good-looking, tall, with a

ready smile. He had a slight limp.

Although I didn't know him, I felt comfortable with Bill. He was so relaxed. We set off. A woman driving a horse and cart clattered by. A large sign painted in white on its side said, "Express Dairy."

"It's odd seeing a woman drive a milk cart," I said to Bill.

"The working men are in the army. All the conductors on the busses are now women. They're working in munitions, too."

"That policeman directing traffic has such big white cuffs up to his elbows. I don't remember seeing that before" I said.

"It's so that at night people and drivers can see him easily in the blackout," he said. "Your mother should wear gloves like that at night. Did you know she was knocked down by a bicycle last week?"

"No, she didn't tell me, but Mummy's always having accidents. The week before she cut herself badly on some broken glass."

"I know."

We walked a few blocks in silence. "What's it like being evacuated, then?" Bill said as we passed a bombed building where high up, sheared-away walls exposed a toilet hanging by a pipe. I expected to see Daddy squatting on it, trousers round his ankles, reading the newspaper and farting. "Alf, customer," Mummy would scream. "He's in the Houses of Parliament," she'd often explain to a man wanting a shave and a haircut.

No one had ever asked me what it was like being evacuated.

"I used to be very lonely living with umpty-one different foster-parents," I said, "but I'm now living in a hostel and I'm very happy there."

I omitted saying that the foster-parents had been *goyishe* and the hostel Jewish, in case I offended him.

"Oh look, that sign says that Dame Myra Hess is going to play a piano concert at the National Gallery."

"You like music?" Bill said.

"Very much. I'd love to go to a concert, but they've shut down all the theaters."

"Nothing's shut down. The theater and concerts go on even while the bombs are dropping. Those actors have guts. Same with the restaurants. There's one restaurant, The Hungaria, that has beds in the basement in case there's a raid and the guests sleep there overnight. Then they're served breakfast in bed in the morning."

I laughed.

"You don't think we Londoners are going to let them Germans muck us about do you?" he said with the good humor of the Cockney. "It's true some things aren't working. See that man inside the telephone booth?"

Its red door lay on the ground.

"Most public telephones aren't working. That's one of the few that is."

We came to a flower shop. The window was cracked, but I could see inside the gladioli, tall and arrogant, which Booba loved and I hated, and Mummy's favorite little bunches of sweet violets. I liked iris, daffodils, carnations and mimosa--colorful, lively and gay flowers.

I felt uncomfortable walking into the shop. Another Jew who knew me might mistakenly believe I was breaking the Sabbath, and think, 'Well if she's breaking it so can I.' This was called, *marat ayin* which meant roughly, 'seeing is believing.'

Against my judgement I followed Bill in.

"Let's get some iris," I said, "something unusual."

"Your uncle probably doesn't care one way or the other."

I should have stayed outside and let Bill buy the flowers, but I was seduced into the world of commerce by the beauty of the blooms which seemed to nod to me. I found myself helping him choose the flowers, irises, taking part in the commercial transaction. I was angry with myself. One step in the wrong direction led to another, the Torah said.

The florist, a painfully thin man, chose six long iris, each with tiny yellow eyes peeking out at us. He added a froth of baby's breath and wrapped them in a tiny bit of wartime paper. Bill paid.

"It's a pity they bombed Big Ben. I loved to hear him chime all over London at night," I said, as we passed the gaunt shells of bombed out churches and synagogues.

"Soon as the war's over, and it won't be long, they'll light his face up and repair his insides. Then he'll boom out as he always did. We'll hear the bells again on the six o'clock news," Bill assured me.

"Speaking of booming, the restaurants seem to be doing a booming business," I said, passing one full of people.

"Lots of people were bombed out last night and have nowhere to eat. Restaurant prices have been fixed by the government, so it's quite cheap to eat out unless, like the Hungaria, they slap on a stiff cover charge. I suppose that's what you pay for breakfast in bed."

Outside a bombed building stood a large portable tin stove. Men, women and children were standing round it, cold hands under their armpits, waiting for the tea urns to be filled. The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) scurried around with huge tin trays stacked with cheese and potted-meat sandwiches. People snatched at the trays as they passed, hungrily stuffing their mouths, then gratefully took the tin mugs of hot tea.

"Ta love," said a man in tattered clothes. "Just been bombed out of my house. Nothing left." He had his arm around his dazed wife, who in turn clutched a little boy covered in dust.

"Ta, love," said a grizzled man, grime in the seams of his face. "Been digging all night. Found a few alive," he said.

In great vans filled with tea urns, china, cutlery, tea and cakes, the YMCA rattled through the cobbled streets on their way

to serve the troops.

An ambulance driven by a pert young woman screamed by.

"Don't look down that street," Bill said suddenly and pulled me by the arm across the road.

"What's there?" I said, all the more curious.

"Nothing. The whole street and all the houses are bombed. There's dead bodies. Rescue workers are trying to identify them."

"Pardon me," said a postman, "I'm new in this area. Is that Greek Street?"

"Yes," Bill said, "That *was* Greek Street."

"I reckon I won't be able to deliver none of these letters, then," the postman said. He hurried back the other way, mumbling "Sixty million changes of address this year."

"Oops, we can't go down there either, it's barred," Bill said as we came to another street. Two policemen in hard hats were tying signs to the rope stretched across the street, saying, "No entry, unexploded bomb."

"Come on, I know another way to the Mildmay," Bill said.

"Here's a more cheerful sign," I said, reading a poster on the wall, "Lunchtime concert at Nelson's Column."

"Secretaries like to go there," Bill said. "Half a mo'," Bill said. "I want to check a mate. See if his name's on the list."

We squeezed through a group of people clumped in front of a wall, anxiously scanning two lists nailed to it. Scrawled in

chalk above the lists it read:

Enquiries re Casualties Top Floor.

Enquiries re Deaths First Floor.

Bill scanned the list of names below each heading.

"Don't see him there. I'll check again later," Bill said. "Got to get you to see your Uncle Sam."

"Oh, look at the man in that coffin," I said, as we passed Christ Church in Spitalfield. "Is he dead?"

"Nah, he's just homeless and sleeping. That's not exactly a coffin, it's a sarcophagus," Bill said.

"What's a sarcophagus?" I said the word slowly.

"It's a very old stone coffin, came from inside the church."

"How d'you know about stone coffins?" I asked.

"Well, I'm in the funeral business, aren't I?" Bill said cheerfully. "My father and I, we're doing well with all the deaths from the blitz," he said, happily. "Good thing, too, me being out of the war. Lost my right eye. It's glass. Can't see so well any more."

The Mildmay was a missionary hospital where the doctors, nuns and nurses tried to convert everyone who walked through their doors, patients and visitors alike. Crucifixes hung on every wall and over every bed.

I had a horror of crucifixion. I imagined that some terrifying enemy might one day lurch out of the blue and nail me up on a cross. I'd get tetanus, lockjaw. The weight of my whole

body drooping from three nails, without support, would be excruciating. It would be so humiliating to be crucified. Hung by nails in the air, stripped of all dignity, powerless to move, I would die a slow, agonizing death. A nice Roman invention.

We came to a bench outside the hospital.

"I'll sit here while you visit your uncle," Bill said.

Uncle Sam looked small in his white bed, his white face stark against his dark hair. A crucifix hung over him. Nuns and nurses hurried to and fro with bedpans and bloody bandages. I kissed his cheek and gave the flowers to a nun.

"May Jesus bless you, my child," she said.

"You look so much better, Uncle," I said.

He didn't notice the flowers nor my stockings.

"Thanks, I feel better," he said. "My arthritis isn't so bad, now. They're injecting me with gold."

"Gold?" I said, astonished.

"They use a gigantic needle. It hurts like hell but I think it's helping. I should soon be out," he said, his dark intelligent eyes boring into mine. He was lying down and I couldn't see his little hump.

"I'm bloody bored to death, here. "Tell me about the wedding."

I told him everything.

"Wish I could have been there," he said. "No one will ever marry me. What else have you been doing?"

I told him about Miss Fox and her strange demand.

"I know her," Uncle Sam said. "Her mother's a customer of Booba's. She comes from a very wealthy old German-Jewish family, but they lost almost everything. She's a big Nosy-Parker. Wants to run everything. She probably wants to get your Mr. Shapiro out of the hostel and put some friend of hers in charge."

"What a chutzpa," I said.

"Or perhaps she really feels you kids are not being treated well."

"I'm amazed anyone would take such an interest in us," I said. "She told me she lived in an adult refugee hostel, but she invited me to tea at a private house."

"It's probably her mother's or aunt's house."

"I hope you'll soon be out of here,"I said, kissing my uncle goodbye. We might not meet again for another few years.

Bill was waiting outside on a bench. We began the walk back. A jeep, driven by a pert WREN in her smart naval uniform, roared round the corner barely missing us.

"Look out," Bill said, pulling me to the pavement.

A naval officer with lots of gold braid sat smugly behind the WREN driver. I remembered Mummy had said that if the war went on until I was eighteen, I'd become a WREN officer, because I'd gone to high school. Surely the war couldn't last three more years.

I saw Uncle Max and Aunt Sylvia once more before leaving. We all had tea at the Dorchester. They held hands and stared at each other wide-eyed like children discovering a wonderful sea shell. Then a tear fell from Sylvia's eyes.

"Whatever's the matter?" I said.

"He's going away. We think to Egypt," she said.

"Got to finish off Rommel, my love. Won't be long before the war's over, darling," Uncle Max said.

Mummy and I left them still gazing into each others' eyes.

My seven days in London were over. Mummy had a permanent to do and couldn't see me off, so Bill walked with me and my bike to Liverpool Street Station.

On the way to the station, I tripped and fell over bomb debris. Blood ran down my leg. I didn't care. I had seen others suffering far worse. Everywhere you looked, you saw ruins. London had been battered by the war, a beautiful lady badly treated. She'd be rebuilt, though, and become stronger than ever. I, too, was battered by the war, but determined to become more beautiful and stronger than ever. Those Huns would never, ever, beat us. Not the English, not the Jews. Not the evacuees. And not me.

As Churchill said of England, I was bloody, but unbowed.

Farewell, Mr. Shapiro

At the end of April an outbreak of measles in the hostel forced us all into quarantine. No one could leave the White House. We missed a week of school. This was a serious loss because they covered so much in one week, especially with matriculation coming up soon.

While in quarantine, I wrote a story for the school's Senior Fitzgerald Literary Contest. I'd won the Junior contest the year before, and hoped to win again.

This year we had to create a chapter we thought was missing from a book we'd read. My favorite book then was *Axel's Castle* by Axel Munthe, a doctor in Switzerland. He'd written his autobiography but included nothing about his childhood. I made one up for him: a rollicking, country boyhood spent in the woods and mountains of Switzerland.

"You can't send your entry in, it might be contagious," Mr. Shapiro said, when I asked him to post it to the school.

Disappointed, I slapped it onto a shelf and forgot about it.

A week later, after evening Hebrew class, Mr. Shapiro called me into his study. "You can send your entry into the competition, but it has to be baked first."

"I'm sure it's too late, now. The deadline's passed."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Bramson lit the gas and heated the oven.

"Slide your story onto the rack," she said.

I slid the story in, about ten pages, feeling the heat of the oven. I was sure my story would be burned to a crisp. It came out warm and crackly, and with little brown bumps on it, looking like matzo, but intact. Nurse posted it to the school.

A week later Mr. Shapiro called me into his study again.

"I'm going away soon for a time. Because you are head girl, I want you to learn how to give a sermon like me, on Shabbat," Mr. Shapiro said.

"That's impossible. I can't give a sermon like you," I said. I wanted to add, "You're crazy." He had studied Torah for years, and I for only a few months.

"You can do it. I have confidence in you. You're a born speaker. You must read through the *Chumash*, the Five Books of Moses, to see if there is anything you don't understand. That way you can ask me about it before I leave."

"Why are you leaving? When?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"I can't bear you to leave," I said, and clamped my hand over my mouth. I'd never dared speak so intimately to him.

"It's all for the best," he said.

"Is it my fault?" I asked, weeping.

"No, of course not. You must learn the Torah," he said.

"It's impossible to read the entire Five Books of Moses in Hebrew and learn to give a sermon like you. No one has your knowledge. You've taught me a lot but I can't possible replace

you."

"Just do as I ask, for me," he said gently.

I fled from his study, crying.

I ran to Nurse. "Why is he leaving us?" I cried.

"I don't know anything," she said. "We'll see in a few weeks. I can tell you this. . ." she began, but then Cookie came in and she stopped herself.

"Just don't say anything to anyone," Nurse whispered.

"What's there to say? I don't know anything except he's leaving. Is it for good?"

"I can't say," Nurse said. "Now get ready for bed."

"Oh, why all the mystery?" I said crossly.

On Sunday, with Mr. Shapiro's help, I drew graphs for homework. Then he made out a prayer list. Each child usually took a turn leading one of the prayers on Shabbat. If it wasn't assigned beforehand, everyone nagged to let them lead their favorite prayer. I took the list up to the big girls' bedroom and was sitting on the window seat reading it, when Anita burst in, red-faced and vexed as usual.

"I'm so upset," she cried. "I'm going to take an exam for a scholarship tomorrow and Mr. Shapiro gave me lots of duties. I asked Ruth if she'd go for the milk instead, so I'd have more time to study, and Mr. Shapiro made a big fuss. He said, 'It's my order that you should go, and go you shall.' Why is he so

mean?"

Mr. Shapiro's behavior upset me so much I couldn't sleep that night thinking about him. Perhaps he was unwell. Maybe he has to go away to go to hospital, I thought. That was it, he must be ill.

Passover arrived and Mr. Shapiro prepared for the Seder. It would be the first Seder I'd ever been to. Wearing his white *kittel* like a silk robe, Mr. Shapiro sat, leaning on a cushion.

"I'm wearing this *kittel* tied with this white belt, to show the seriousness of this ceremony," he began. "The *kittel* is worn only on special occasions: on Yom Kippur, the Passover Seder, a marriage, or burial.

I felt as though he was wearing it to show the end of his time at the hostel. It was, for me, as if he were dying. I was convinced I'd never see him again, I'd never see his handsome face or the blood spot on his eye, never hear his voice coaching me, encouraging me, teaching me. Why was he abandoning me when I needed him so badly?

"I'm leaning on this cushion to show we are free men and no longer slaves in Egypt. The Seder recounts the story of God delivering us from slavery in Egypt and taking us to the Promised land, to Israel.

"The word Seder means the *order* in which we tell the story tonight: leaving slavery in Egypt, accepting God and his laws,

entering Israel and changing into a holy people."

He pointed to a large round dish on which lay five different strange foods. He pointed to each.

"This matzo is the bread of affliction, symbolizing our sufferings as slaves in Egypt. We left in such haste that the bread had no time to rise. The bone represents the lamb--which the Egyptians worshipped--that we sacrificed before leaving Egypt. The egg symbolizes the wholeness of God, the world and life, with no beginning and no end. The bitter horseradish symbolizes our bitter life as slaves in Egypt, forced to make bricks without straw, and to throw our sons into the Nile. The *charoset*, a mixture of apples, nuts and honey, represents the mortar Jewish slaves used to hold the bricks together while building Pithom and Ramses, two Egyptian cities.

I thought of my own journey from a secular Jewish family through nine gentile foster-homes, until I found a Torah life in the hostel, which was like a miniature land of Israel to me.

After several blessings, the youngest in the family--four year-old Stanley Shapiro, asked The Four Questions. Looking tiny in his velvet Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, he stood up, his chin just reaching the table, and in a child's clear voice chanted in Hebrew, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Then he chanted the answer: "On all other nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread, on this night only matzo; on all other nights we eat all kinds of greens, on this night, bitter herbs;

on all other nights we don't dip our food even once, on this night, twice; on all other nights we eat either sitting or leaning, on this night we all lean as we eat."

"Very good, Stanley," Selma said, and all the children clapped. He smiled shyly, clinging to Mrs. Shapiro's skirts. I looked round happily at all the shining faces, and squeezed Selma's hand under the table. She smiled and squeezed my hand back. If any of these children had been with their real families, they might have been the youngest, asking the important Four Questions. But at the White House we were like one big family, a family for each other.

Mr. Shapiro continued. "Everyone dip your little finger in your wine. Let a drop fall in your saucer for each plague that God sent on the Egyptians, because they wouldn't let the Jews go."

He recited the ten plagues: "Rivers of blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, cattle plague, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn, even of Pharoah's family."

What a terrible outcry there must have been in Egypt, I imagined, as each father and mother found their youngest dead. But I also imagined the anguish of Jewish mothers watching the Egyptians throw their newborn sons into the Nile. And I thought of the anguish of mothers watching the Nazis, even as we spoke, kill their children, of those same mothers forced into slave labor much like our ancestors.

We each licked our little finger that had released a drop of wine for each plague.

"And God delivered us . . . to the Promised Land," Mr. Shapiro chanted.

I was enthralled by the dramatic colored pictures in the *Haggadah*, the story book of Passover: of the Egyptian overseers beating Jewish slaves; of the ten plagues; of the robed Jews hastily leaving Egypt, crossing the Red Sea on dry land, the waves standing up on each side, only to crash down on the pursuing Egyptians and their horses--waves which God sent down on them. If only he'd send such waves against the Nazis.

On this night The *Haggadah* demanded that we imagine ourselves as slaves in Egypt and that we, personally had escaped. I pictured myself in the Haggadah drawings of freed Jewish slaves trekking through the wilderness with the holy ark in our midst, a pillar of cloud going before us by day and a pillar of fire by night, thousands walking toward the freedom of the Promised Land. I felt a fierce sense of belonging to the Jewish people, an almost tribal closeness to everyone at the table. I wondered which of the twelve tribes I had belonged to. Judah the lion would be my tribe. One day I and my children would settle in Judah in Israel. Halfway through the Seder, we ate a scrumptious meal of soup, roast beef, roast potatoes, peas, and cake.

"Where did he hide the *afikomen*?" all the little ones asked.

We couldn't finish the meal and say grace until the piece of matzo Mr. Shapiro had hidden at the beginning of the meal had been found. The children ran all over the place searching for it. Finally, little Bertie, an East End kid whose parents had been killed in the Blitz, found it hidden behind a pile of books in the common room.

"What's my reward?" he asked cheekily, sniffing.

"I'll take you to Cambridge to see *Little Lord Fauntleroy* next week," Mr. Shapiro said, smiling. "They're playing it again."

"Oooh," everyone breathed jealously at this wonderful prize.

Finally, we sang the ending song:

> "My father sold a kid for two zuzim,
> then came a cat that ate the kid that my father bought for two zuzim; then the dog bit the cat, the stick beat the dog, a fire burned the stick, water quenched the fire, an ox drank the water, the slaughterer killed the ox, the Angel of Death killed the slaughterer, and God killed the Angel of Death who killed the slaughterer that killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burned the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid that my father bought for two zuzim."

We sang it very fast and collapsed laughing at its end.

"This song represents all the empires which consumed each other while the littlest nation, Israel, remained," Mr. Shapiro said. We all sang as a finale, "Next Year may we be in Jerusalem."

We all rose very tired and happy to go to bed. But before we could leave, Mr. Shapiro said, in a solemn voice, "Children, there's something I have to tell you. Please sit down."

We sat down quietly, afraid of what he would say.

"Children," he said in a gentle voice, looking down, "I'm afraid I soon have to leave you. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I really love studying, learning and teaching you, but I have to go away. God bless you all and good luck in whatever you do."

I burst into tears.

Selma and Helga put their arms around me.

There was total silence in the dining room except for Bertie, the snotty-nosed kid who had found the hidden matzo. He gulped and sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve, East End style. The little children all looked at Mr. Shapiro in awe. They couldn't believe he was going. For some he'd been their only father. Mrs. Shapiro, holding little Stanley close, sat with her eyes downcast, a sad smile on her face.

Mr. Shapiro continued:

"I've been with some of you now for five years. Some of you were only four when you came here, alone and frightened. I've seen you grow up, grow strong, and have taught you daily Hebrew, *Chumash*, and the Torah. I can only hope that you'll continue with your studies and make me proud of you when we meet again.

"I am going to become headmaster of the Menorah Jewish High School in London. Perhaps after the war some of you may be coming there. I'll look forward to seeing you."

He then sat down, his head bowed, amid silence except for some subdued snuffles. We didn't know what to do or say.

"Gilda, will you sing for us?" Mr. Shapiro finally asked.

I gulped back my tears, dashed my hand across my face. Selma passed me a handkerchief and I wiped my eyes. I stood up.

What could I sing? I felt so mixed up. Mr. Shapiro had been so good to me. I owed him everything, not just my education, but also for introducing me to a new life full of meaning, as a human and as a Jew.

I learned much later that the Committee decided to choose a new warden because Mr. Shapiro spanked the younger children and was too strict with some, like Anita. They were also displeased with the manner in which he dealt with certain situations, particularly, the Green Room. He may have had his faults, but for me, Mr. Shapiro was an inspired and dedicated teacher. It hurt to think that he was leaving, but I also felt proud to be among his chosen at the hostel.

I sang the slow, beautiful song my mother had taught me, the one I had once sung in the orphanage, when the gentiles had asked me to sing a Jewish song. *Shuvi nafshi*--the words said that even though everyone deserted me, I would believe in God's help. The tune was very moving and suited to my low voice. Tears rose to my eyes as I sang, and when I finished everyone was silent for a full minute.

As Passover marked the departure of the Jews from Egypt, led by Moses to Israel, so I saw my life. I had been exiled by

my parents to live with gentile foster parents and finally came to live in a spiritual home at the hostel, led by Mr. Shapiro. As Moses left the Jews before they entered the holy land, so Mr. Shapiro was leaving the hostel. And just as Moses had left behind a close band of dedicated Jews, so had Mr. Shapiro left us. I would always be inspired by him.

All the children stood up and held hands, including Mr. and Mrs. Shapiro. We then sang:

Shalom aleichem, shalom aleichem, shalom, shalom,

Lehitraot, lehitraot, shalom, shalom.

Hallo and goodbye, may we meet again soon, in peace.

Cookie Meets her Match

Our new warden and matron, Rabbi and Mrs. Kohler looked like an illustration of the nursery rhyme, "Jack Spratt could eat no fat, his wife could eat no lean."

The rabbi was about forty, tall and slim. His bearded face was dark and handsome, with introspective eyes behind the thick glasses.

Like Mr. Shapiro he was a Hebrew scholar, but he didn't have Mr. Shapiro's wide knowledge of English literature or command of English. Nor did he have Mr. Shapiro's volatile temper, but rather the manner of a courtly German-Jewish gentleman. I never developed any personal love-hate or indeed any other kind of relationship with him, such as I'd had with Mr. Shapiro. I didn't mind. As far as I was concerned, we were just ships passing. I was still loyal to Mr. Shapiro.

Mrs. Kohler had a generous bosom and character, and the hindquarters of a rhinoceros. As a married woman, she covered her hair according to Jewish laws of modesty--to deter the covetous glances of other men. In her case she wrapped a tight bandanna around her small head. She clutched her little schnauzer Schatzi to her bosom everywhere she went, except the kitchen.

The rabbi's first wife had died years before. Why he'd married the second Mrs. Kohler was a mystery. He seemed cut-out

for a slender sophisticated woman. Perhaps it was a marriage arranged by a *shadchan*, in which the other-worldly bridegroom had only the slightest involvement. Or perhaps he wanted a mother for his two little girls.

What a shock we received the first morning after Mrs. Kohler's arrival.

"*Aufstehen*," wake up, Mrs. Kohler screamed, poking her bound head into our bedroom door.

"Does she think we're in a German concentration camp?" Anita grumbled, as we reluctantly climbed out of bed.

That evening, after supper, Cookie crouched on the window-seat of the big girls' room filing her long, white-tipped finger-nails, her only pride and joy. Anita sat next to Cookie brushing her thick, tangled hair. We all brushed our hair a hundred strokes a night, as we'd heard upper class girls did, so that it should shine.

The four-acre garden and tall trees stretched green beyond the windows. The flowers had died and fallen autumn leaves glowed red, skittering on the veranda.

"He's quite handsome with that great black beard and dark eyes," I said from my bed next to Selma's. "He looks like Theodore Herzl." I'd been writing about Rabbi Kohler in my orange diary.

"Who's Theodore Herzl?" Helga asked in her small voice.

"A famous Zionist. Herzl went to all the kings of Turkey,

England, Germany, and Italy and asked them to give Palestine back to the Jews. Mr. Shapiro said the Irgun will get Israel back for us after the war," I said.

"And just who is the Irgun, Miss Know-it-all?" Cookie asked.

"It's a small army of Jewish fighters in Palestine trying to get the British out of our country, Miss Ignoramus. The Irgun refuses to fight anymore *for* the British, because the Brits won't let Jewish refugees into Palestine."

"Who wants to talk about war? What do you think of Mrs. Kohler?" Anita asked Cookie.

"Mrs. Kohler is 'the wicked stepmother,'" Cookie said. She crossed her eyes and put her little fingers inside the corners of her mouth and pulled it down, showing her lower teeth. "She's mean to her older stepdaughter, Ruth."

"Her little dog Schatzi is adorable," Helga said. "I love the way her doggy hair falls into her eyes."

"A schnauzer," Cookie said, "we had two at home in Berlin."

"They're nice people, but I don't think he's going to help me prepare for my exams as Mr. Shapiro did," I said.

"Stop biting your nails, you'll pass," Selma drawled, lying on her bed, arms behind her head, her breasts pointed up.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," everyone screamed at once.

The Kohlers' oldest daughter, Ruth, slid one foot inside the door. She was thirteen, plain, with apple cheeks, small brown

eyes, buck teeth but a sunny smile. "My stepmother wants you all to come down for dinner," she said.

"Your skirt's too short," Cookie said.

"I know," Ruth said, her smile still in place. "My stepmother won't buy me a new one. Can I borrow someone's? I don't like my knees showing. It's not modest."

"Here, use one of mine, I think it'll fit you," Anita said.

"Can I come in too?" Lili asked shyly, poking her head in.

"Come in, come in," we all chorused.

Lili edged in slowly, her dimpled cheeks pink.

"Why are you blushing all over?" Cookie said to Lili.

"Don't tease my sister, she's very shy," Ruth said fiercely. "She's only eleven."

"At least she's pretty," Cookie said, "not fat like you."

Ruth's face turned red but she still said calmly, "Mother wants us all downstairs."

Cookie tossed her head. "Phoo," she said. "I'm not going."

I put my diary under my pillow and pulled up my stockings. "Nurse told me that before he came to England, your father had a congregation in Germany," I said to Ruth, to change the subject.

"I bet he's still in shock finding himself in charge of a children's hostel," Cookie said, slapping Ruth hard on the back, as we went downstairs. Ruth stumbled and almost fell, catching herself on the bannister.

"Cookie, don't be so rough," I said. "Can't you be pleasant

to someone new?"

I remembered her nasty trick on me when I had first arrived.

"He's used to hostels," Ruth said, frowning at Cookie. "He was in charge of a boys' refugee hostel in Birmingham before he came here."

"Really, a boys' hostel?" Marta said. "You lucky girls, living with all those boys. Were they big boys or shrimps like the ones here?"

"They were aged five to seventeen," Ruth said.

"Seventeen! It would be lovely to have some big boys here," I said. I imagined a room full of Joseph Singers.

"Phew," Cookie whistled. "Just imagine big boys. Why don't we have any here?" she pouted, as we clattered into the kitchen, poured water over our hands, and said the blessing. Throughout supper, all we could talk about--in low voices of course--were those strange creatures, boys.

Next morning after breakfast Nurse called me aside. She held me fast by my sleeve. I was late and as I pulled away, I heard the faint sound of ripping fabric.

"I'll miss the train," I protested. I'd miss the Yanks, too.

"This is important. Rabbi Kohler has invited some of the boys from his last hostel to stay here for Rosh Hashana. He needs at least ten men, including himself for the New Year services. He's asked five boys and four Jewish servicemen to

come."

"A *minyan*? Ten men. That means they'll all be over 13. Oh, wonderful," I said. "The girls will be so excited."

Girls over twelve were, by Jewish law, women, while boys over thirteen, were men.

Nurse shook her head, a severe frown on her face. "As head girl you have to tell the big girls not to make fools of themselves," she said.

Being head girl seemed to mean giving out all the bad news.

"Okay, I'll speak to them," I said, and dashed out after Selma, Cookie and Helga, who had already left for the train.

"Guess what, Cookie," I panted, crunching along on the gravel road after I'd caught up with the girls. "Your wish has come true. We're having boys down here for Rosh Hashana."

"How many, how old, when will they arrive?" Selma, Cookie and Helga asked as we crowded onto the train. For once we had a carriage to ourselves. No Yanks today. We flung ourselves onto the cut velvet seats, ready for a good gossip.

"They have to be at least aged thirteen to be part of a *minyan*. That's all I know," I said. Cookie grinned mischievously.

"No pranks, Cookie," I said. "You have to behave yourself."

Selma said nothing but leaned further back into her seat, letting her long hair fall over her face. She wasn't interested. Even in a year or two, they'd still be too young for husband

material.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid of big boys," Helga said.

"You're such a mouse," Cookie said.

"That's my nickname," Helga laughed ruefully.

"But she did stand up to Mr. Shapiro when he spanked her brother," I said. "She's a tiger when it comes to her brother." Helga gave me a grateful smile.

That night I announced a meeting of all the girls eleven and older. There were seven of us including myself. In addition to Selma, Cookie and Helga, the other three were Marta the Czech ballerina, Norma, whose brother Hans I so admired, and Anita. Paula, who had once sung with me, had left the hostel months before. We gathered in a circle.

"We're going to host boys here for Rosh Hashana," I told them.

There were screams of delight and a hundred questions.

"The boys are going to be living right here in the hostel for about a week. We must be friendly but not make fools of ourselves by falling all over them."

"We promise," they chorused, all except Cookie, Selma and Anita who, for different reasons, said nothing.

Five boys arrived *Erev Rosh Hashana*--the afternoon of the New Year in October of 1944. Outside, a cool and blustery wind blew. We older girls stood in the entrance hall to meet them.

Only Cookie stayed upstairs, pretending she didn't care. The boys trooped into the hallway, came to a dead halt and stood clumped together, tall, thin and green, like the bunch of wild asparagus we'd found growing in the garden.

Rabbi Kohler rushed out of his study, enthusiastically pumped all the boys' hands up and down, then spoke to the shortest who stood in front of the others like Napoleon.

"Zo, Alex, you're here at last, my dear pupil," he said. "Make yourzelves at home, zee you at zervices," he said, and in his usual absent-minded and kindly manner, he patted them each on the head. Then he walked off to his study, his beard thrust out before him like a flag, his large hands clasped behind the back of his long, black jacket.

He didn't think it necessary to introduce us--mere girls--to the boys who were still bunched together in the hallway.

I stepped forward. "I'm Gilda, head girl, welcome to the White House," I said.

"I'm Alex," said Rabbi Kohler's "dear pupil."

Alex was my height, just over five-feet-two. He looked about fourteen years old but stood very straight and sure of himself. He stared at me out of enormous black eyes in the clearest white eyeballs. The dark eyes and eyebrows stood out like those painted on an Egyptian mummy. His skin was so smooth and dark, he could have been an Indian or African rather than a German-Jewish refugee. He wore a smart small-checked suit, waistcoat, white

shirt, and a neat black tie. The other boys, even the tallest, all stood twitching nervously behind him. They reminded me of the Jewish boys in Ely who used to follow us girls round and round in Woolworth's, led by "Laurence Olivier," all of them struck dumb when our two groups, came face-to-face. Alex, however, spoke and moved easily.

I summoned my best manners. "How was your journey?" I asked Alex.

"Awful. All the straight-through trains from Birmingham were reserved for troops. We had to stand packed in the corridors the entire way. We changed at Crewe, Cambridge, and three other places, I'm so tired I can't remember where," Alex said, passing his knuckles over his smooth forehead.

He spoke quickly in clipped English with the sardonic tone of an upper-class Englishman, except he had the faintest foreign accent and a touch of the midlands accent, no doubt from living in Birmingham. I was a little awed by his extreme self-confidence but refused to show it. I wanted to offer the boys a chair and a drink but had no authority to do either. For a moment we stood in awkward silence.

"Bitch!" Mrs. Kohler screamed, suddenly rushing out with Schatzi under her arm.

I was astonished. The other girls' mouths dropped open. We all looked at Alex whom Mrs. Kohler was apparently addressing. Wasn't he insulted?

She put the dog down and enveloped Alex in a gigantic hug. "I'm so pleazed to zee you again."

Alex detached himself gently from Mrs. Kohler's enormous bosom, offered her his hand, and smiled. His black eyes sparkled in his dark face, his teeth were very white and even, his smile wicked. Two tiny dimples appeared in his cheeks.

"How are you, Mrs. Kohler? So kind of you to have invited us all for the holy days," he said smoothly, his eyes laughing. I had the feeling he always had a ready answer and was always in control of a situation.

The other four boys looked on, grinning, shuffling their huge feet in embarrassment and happiness at seeing the motherly Mrs. Kohler again. Perhaps she'd taken the place of their own missing mothers. She shook hands with each and beamed at them all. Then she babbled at Alex in German. He smiled in a disarming way and answered her in German, the tone of his voice teasing and slightly sarcastic.

Schatzi licked Alex's shoes, jumped frantically up at him, all four paws off the ground, and yelped, "Yap, yap, yap," in sharp barks. Alex leaned down lazily and gently tickled Schatzi's ear. She yapped joyously, rolled over, stood up, then jumped right into his arms and licked his face. Alex's smiled his white smile, dark eyes dancing mischievously.

Mrs. Kohler said, "Schatzi remembers you. She always loved you."

The other boys stood transfixed, waiting, it seemed, for Alex to tell them what to do. I didn't know what to do with them either. The older girls had drawn closer and now stood behind me. The younger children were hanging over the banisters and peeping out of the dining room the way they did when I had first arrived.

At last Mrs. Kohler turned again to the waiting boys.

"I'm goink to the kitchen to finish cooking for tonight, but I'll have a snack for you boys in a few minutes," she said. "Poor boys. You must be starvink."

The boys nodded their heads vigorously, the first sign of life. "We are," they murmured as she scuttled off to the kitchen.

The boys and we girls stood staring at each other, not knowing what to say or do, when Cookie appeared.

Jouncing down the grand staircase in her socks and rubber plimsolls, her short, full skirt swishing around her legs, she stopped for a fraction of a second, one foot poised to take the next step. She looked down at Alex. Alex looked up at her. His black eyes locked on her blue eyes. She continued down the stairs, walked straight up to him, held out her hand, and without smiling said, "I'm Cookie, let me show you the garden."

They left together staring into each other's eyes. The other boys, still rooted to the same spot, said not a word.

We couldn't seem to talk to each other now. Tonight, I was thinking, we would talk over dinner. We would have a feast of

chicken soup, roast chicken, potatoes and home-grown asparagus, for Rosh Hashana, the New Year. It was also the custom to have a new fruit not yet tasted since the New Year had begun. The long, awkward silence was finally broken by the tallest boy.

"I'm Ralph, Alex's brother," he said.

Although tall and attractive with dark curly hair, dark skin and eyes, and a sensitive mouth, Ralph had none of Alex's verve. He looked about seventeen but as unsure of himself as Alex was sure. *He* at least knew his manners.

"This is Herman," Ralph said to us girls. Herman was a thin, cocky boy with a *chutzperdick*, cheeky face, and a shock of straight sandy hair falling into his eyes, a football under his arm. He looked about fifteen. "Herman is our sports maniac," Ralph added.

"This is Joey," he went on, laying a hand on the shoulder of a plump, tall, ungainly boy. Joey's shirt hung out of his trousers, his shoes were scuffed and his jacket was too small. He seemed to be about fourteen years old. With his curly blond hair and blue eyes, he looked like a large Aryan cherub who had flown down from a church ceiling. He smiled at us shyly.

"My name is Bernard," added a tall, angular boy with a big nose and cold green eyes. I guessed Bernard was fifteen and had no sense of humor. He was like an adult, serious and worried.

After the introductions, I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer. I asked Ralph,"Why does Mrs. Kohler call Alex 'Bitch?'"

"'Bitch,' is a pet name in German, "*bitschen*." Mrs. Kohler adores Schatzi who is a little bitch, so she calls Alex Bitch as well," Ralph said simply. Without a trace of jealousy, he added, "My brother was Rabbi Kohler's favorite among the boys, because he's such a brilliant student of Torah and Gemorra. We all call him Bitch, it's quite all right."

He had, like his brother, very white teeth. Most wartime children had good teeth because we had almost no sugar to ruin them.

All the small children and the big girls--except for male-hating Anita--crept closer to inspect the boys. I had just finished introducing the big girls, who were giddy with excitement, when Ruth and Lili Kohler arrived in the hallway. Ruth beamed at the boys, slapped them happily on the back and asked them how they were. Lili hung back but smiled, shyly, with her red lips and dimples. Though they'd all lived together for several years in her father's hostel, she blushed a pretty pink whenever one of the boys looked at her.

"Where's Bitch?" Ruth asked.

"Cookie took him into the garden," I said.

I hoped Cookie wouldn't pull the same prank on him as she had on me when I first arrived, "helping" me climb a tree then letting me fall. But they'd seemed besotted with each other on sight. I couldn't believe Cookie would fall for a young man as sure of himself as Alex or that someone as polished as Alex would

fall for such a hoyden as Cookie. Perhaps when he found out what she was really like. . .

Mrs. Kohler finally rushed back. "Come and have something to eat, boys. I've got gefilte fish and bread and tea. It'll keep you until dinner time. We won't be eating until after services. You, too, Lili, come *kindt*."

She ignored Ruth, her other stepdaughter, who stood staring angrily after Lili and the boys. She reminded me of how angry my mother must have felt when Booba so clearly favored Regina. As Lili followed her stepmother, Ruth came upstairs with the rest of us. We went to the big girls' room and chattered excitedly as we washed and changed for Rosh Hashana.

Cookie came back from the garden and joined us upstairs.

"What's he like? What did he say? What did you do?" the girls asked.

"Never mind all that. I have a great idea," Cookie whispered to us, "why don't we sew up the boys' pajamas at the knee before the festival begins, so they can't get into them tonight? They're not allowed to tear them open on *yomtov*," she laughed. "Of course, not Bitch's pajamas," she said. "Just the others."

"It's not a very nice way to greet guests," I said. "I asked you not to play any pranks on the boys."

"Oh don't be such a stick-in-the-mud," Cookie said. "I even have Nurse's permission. Who's going to join me?"

"How on earth did you get Nurse's permission?" I said.

Cookie just smirked.

"Well, okay, I'll help," Ruth said, "but you'd better hurry, they're all in the bathroom washing and shaving."

"*Shaving?*" the girls echoed. Shaving was a mystical male rite to the girls whose fathers, grandfathers, uncles and brothers had disappeared. I had often watched my father shave himself or his customers with his wicked, open, bone-handled razor. I used to watch that knife glide over a prone man's adam's apple and wait to see if Daddy would cut the man's throat.

Under Cookie's direction the girls sabotaged our guests' pajamas, though Cookie refused to let anyone touch Alex's. Then she went to find him. From our window we watched them disappear into the garden.

Cookie and Alex didn't come back until it was time to light the candles for *yomtov*. They both looked dazed, as if someone had blindfolded them, spun them round three times the way we did the catcher in Blind Man's Bluff, then ripped the blindfold off. What on earth was the matter with them?

We held Rosh Hashana services in the common room. The seats were set up in rows, one side for the men and boys, the other for the women and girls. The five boys, two British airmen and two American soldiers from the air force base at Stansted joined Rabbi Kohler to make up the *minyan* of ten men. Two of the men wore wedding rings. In this public place we couldn't laugh and flirt with these men as we did with the Yanks on the train. As

the boys and men with yarmulkes on their heads prayed devotedly and bowed to God at each blessing, I was reminded of the first time I'd prayed and fasted on Yom Kippur at the Ely boys' hostel, and when I'd fallen for Joseph Singer. If only one of these boys had been someone romantic like him. I was intrigued with Alex, but he had immediately fallen for Cookie. It wasn't fair. Of all the girls, why did he have to pick my bete noire, Cookie? It seemed to be my fate that I was too old for boys my age and too young for the Yanks.

We ate in the dining room, festive with white cloths, golden challahs, wine, and Mrs. Kohler's flickering holy day candles. She made the blessing over them, then blessed her two stepdaughters. Ruth, the eldest, stepped forward to be blessed first, as was her right, but her stepmother put her hands on Lili's head first, and said in Hebrew, "May the Lord rejoice in you like Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, and Sarah." It reminded me of Isaac blessing Jacob first, although Esau was his firstborn, and how Jacob in turn favored Joseph and how bitterly Joseph's brothers punished him for this favoritism.

Rabbi Kohler made the traditional New Year blessing by dipping bread in honey for each of us and passing it round. Then he dipped a slice of apple in honey and passed that around, too.

"May this be a good and sweet year," he said in Hebrew. "And may we have peace and all be reunited with our loved ones this year. We pray God that the war ends this year. We pray all

to be united in peace in Jerusalem."

Mrs. Kohler said to Nurse, flirtatiously flickering her eyes at Rabbi Kohler, "Mrs. Gross, please pass this soup to Rabbi Kohler." We knew then that Mrs. Kohler was *nide*, that she was impure and could not touch nor be touched by her husband. Nor would she pass anything directly to him during this time, even though she was sitting right next to him. Nurse laughed as she took the soup from Mrs. Kohler. Poor Mrs. Kohler was still hoping to conceive. But when Sarah, at the age of a hundred had given up hope of conceiving a band of angels in the guise of men had visited, and promised her a child. What if the visiting boys were a disguised band of angels? I smiled at the thought.

We ended the meal all chanting the blessing. This time, since there were at least three men at the table, the rabbi said in Hebrew, "Gentlemen, shall we say the blessing?"

The men and boys responded, "Let us do so," and they rose and bowed to each other, then sat to sing the long grace.

It was wonderful to hear deep male voices join our girlish voices and to have men and women and children all together, as if we were a real family.

"Let's go in the garden," I said, after the meal. The big girls and the boys went out into the cool night air. We talked under moonlit trees. We spoke hesitatingly to the boys. The girls asked them the usual questions: "Where were you born? When

did you come to England? Did you come alone or with someone? Did you come on the Kindertransport?"

I remained silent. I felt uncomfortable asking such questions. If the boys made the same inquiries about me, they would find out I was the only British born girl among forty refugees--an exile among exiles.

Like Helga's mother and father, Alex and Ralph's parents were in a concentration camp. The other boys' parents had been killed. I dared not reveal that I had both parents, grandparents, and a full set of relatives who didn't want me. I couldn't tell the others that. I couldn't accept it myself.

Alex and Cookie talked, heads close together, until bed-time. I tried to draw out Ralph, but he seemed to be listening to a distant and sad song deep inside himself. He answered almost everything with one word, absently. He was so dark-haired, pale and handsome, his face stricken.

"Goodnight, good *yomtov*, a good festival," we all said and drifted off to our rooms. The boys had been assigned a room on the second floor. We continued upstairs to our third floor attic. In the big girls' room we stopped talking and listened. Sure enough we soon heard loud yelling.

"Donnerblitzenkriegen! "Damn, someone's sewn my pajamas up at the knees, I can't get into them."

There were a lot more yells and curses and we girls, even I,

had to stifle our giggles, hands over our mouths.

The next morning at breakfast, we tried to keep straight faces as Alex demanded, "Which of you girls sewed our pajamas up?" He was half angry, half laughing, even though his own pair had been spared.

"What, us?" We all feigned innocence.

"Yes, you. Don't play innocent with us. We know you did it," Alex said. "The punishment is thirty lashes."

"We're terrified," Cookie said, pretending fear.

We all giggled knowing there was no way they could chastise us.

After a special festival breakfast of yeast cakes with raisins and chocolate chips and tea, we had morning services for Rosh Hashana.

Alex was called to the *bima*, the lectern in the center of the common room, to read the Torah. The scroll of the Torah, handwritten on parchment, lay on the high table, the bold black Hebrew letters clear even from my seat.

Alex chanted the *Torah*, a section of which was read every Shabbat. It took great skill and training to learn the intricate chant accompanying each phrase of the Hebrew. Only tiny marks, curls and bars, over or under the Hebrew words--beside the dots and dashes for vowels--denoted the musical phrase for each part of the sentence. I'd never heard anyone *trop* or chant as

expertly and crisply as Alex. Everyone was silent, listening to him in awe while following the Hebrew in the *Chumash*, the Five Books of Moses.

I saw Cookie's blue eyes glowing with admiration at the confident and clear rise and fall of Alex's manly voice, his quick and perfect musical phrasing. She watched his every move: his black curly head bent over the open white scroll, the fringe of his dark lashes on his tawny cheek as he looked down, his huge black eyes moving from right to left, following each word as his square hand moved the silver-carved placemarker shaped like a pointing finger from right to left. Cookie even watched the rise in his chest when he took a deep breath. She watched his every move, the way I had once watched Joseph Singer.

Alex finished on a triumphant note and came up for air.

"*Shekoach*, strength, you did that very well," Rabbi Kohler said. "You always were my best student."

The rabbi grasped Alex's hand and shook it warmly, then hugged him. Alex grinned his wicked white smile at Rabbi Kohler. Perhaps the rabbi saw in him the clever son he never had. Mrs. Kohler surely hoped that she might yet be able to present him with such a jewel.

At the end of the Rosh Hashana service, the rabbi blew the *shofar*, the ram's horn. He looked like the classic patriarch, white and black-striped prayer shawl draped over his head, beard and ram's horn pointing to the sky as the strong, unwavering pure

sound poured out. I closed my eyes and imagined myself standing high on a hill at the Temple in Jerusalem, the pure sound sweeping over me, the Jerusalem breeze whipping my white robes.

After services Cookie went up to Alex and stood very close to him. Neither of them smiled. I couldn't hear what they were saying but I saw them almost nose to nose, looking intensely into each other's eyes as if at the flame of a candle. They stopped breathing. Then Cookie broke off and put her lips to his ear and whispered. Alex shook himself, tickled, I thought, by her breath and smiled his great white, wicked smile. His sparkling dark eyes danced as mischievously as hers usually did. But for once, her eyes were serious.

They were together the entire two day festival. They ate breakfast together, separating only for services into the men's and women's side, and met again immediately after. They sat together at the table for lunch, where he gallantly pulled the chair out for her, and at afternoon Torah sessions. They strolled the garden as if they owned it, disappearing into its secret nooks and emerging with tendrils of leaves in their hair. Once they came out with crowns of leaves and flowers on their heads. In the hallways and common room, they talked in whispers oblivious of everyone else--his dark and her blonde head, his black and her blue eyes always close together.

Mr. Shapiro would never have allowed this. The Kohlers were far more relaxed and trusted in our innocence. In this they were right, since we were romantics but totally naive of real life. We knew nothing of sex except for the kisses we'd seen in films.

On Sunday, the last day of the festival, Alex appeared at the top of the long staircase, dark and triumphant, carrying Cookie in his arms. With her arms round his neck she looked serene, as if this was where she belonged, like a bride. As he walked slowly down the stairs, her skirt trailed the steps. I'd never seen her so calm.

"Don't they look like Romeo and Juliet?" I whispered to Selma.

"They do. Except they don't belong to warring families."

"They might fight after the war. Cookie comes from a wealthy family. Alex's parents will have nothing, even if they come out of Buchenwald alive."

"How sweet those children are," Mrs. Kohler said.

But I knew this was not child's play. Alex and Cookie were dead serious about each other. The war intensified all emotions and made adults out of children in every way except, perhaps, sexually.

Alex and Cookie were not the only ones to find romance during the festival. Marta and Joey drifted by, she slender as a willow with her straight ballerina walk and chin held high, he a large, bumbling boy, fair hair falling in his face, blue eyes

blind with adoration.

Bernard was seen courting Selma who disdainfully consented to go for walks with him but did not, I knew, see him as husband material. She wanted a man, not a boy.

Herman chased after each girl in turn like a frolicking puppy. But he liked sports more than girls. On the second evening of the festival, we were all in the garden before dinner. Herman dribbled a ball, tossed it up, hit it with his head a few times, then dropped it down again to the ground and kicked it to Bernard.

"Come and play soccer," Herman called out to the boys. Bernard kicked the ball to Joey who, surprisingly fast, kicked it to Ralph, who just looked at it. Herman ran hard to get the ball before the others. He tripped over a tree root and fell awkwardly on his hand.

He lay still, biting his lip, his face pale.

"Ooh," he cried, "My hand, oh..it's killing me. . ."

"Ach, mine poor liddle boy," Mrs. Kohler cried, running out from the kitchen, bosom and buttocks jouncing.

Alex squatted down and looked at the hand. "It looks broken. Better not move," he said in his dry, clipped voice.

He ran inside and returned with a pillow and blanket,gently eased the pillow under Herman's head, and covered him with the blanket.

"Alex wants to be a doctor," Cookie said proudly to

everyone.

The new, young and handsome village doctor we'd all been dying to meet arrived. He set Herman's hand, bound it, and put it in a sling.

"Oh, Herman, you look so glamorous in a sling, just like a war hero," Selma teased.

During dinner Rabbi Kohler was immersed in his thoughts.

I missed the Hebrew lessons, and listening to Mr. Shapiro read interesting stories to us at the dinner table. On the other hand, the Kohlers were far more relaxed with us. Mrs. Kohler was much more motherly than Mrs. Shapiro. I had to admit I liked being fussed over a little. Rabbi Kohler didn't notice girls at all.

"Ess, kindt, ess," Mrs. Kohler would beg each child. "Eat, child, eat. You must to build up your strength."

After dinner I went into the garden for some air. It was dark and cool. After a while I knew I wasn't alone. Looking up, I saw Herman coolly sitting in a tree, the glow of his cigarette burning red. He slid down agilely, even with one arm in a sling, and joined me.

"What do you think of the teenage sweethearts?" Herman said with a laugh.

"It looks serious," I said quietly.

"It must be. Bitch has never gone for a girl before. But I'll tell you this, when Bitch wants something, he gets it."

"I don't see any opposition from Cookie. She hasn't played a prank for two whole days. She's a changed creature."

"If you say so," Herman said. "Please excuse me, I promised I'd join Joey. He's going to teach me how to play chess," and he went inside.

I walked further into the garden and sat on a wooden bench, watching the crisscrossing searchlights.

Ralph came outside and sat next to me. We sat there silently for a while. I didn't know what to say to him. He put his head in his hands and caught his breath in a kind of sob.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"I think day and night only of my parents locked away in this hell they call Buchenwald. I made a vow that if they come out alive, I swear I'll be religious for the rest of my life."

I was silent. Vows were very serious in the Jewish religion. They were discouraged because once taken they must be kept. I remembered the terrible story of Jepthah who vowed to sacrifice the first thing he saw on his return from a victory. His daughter came out to meet him.

Only on Yom Kippur, at Kol Nidre, did we pray to be released from our vows, and then only from those taken under duress. These were vows Jews were forced to make to become Christian or Moslem, under threat of death.

"I understand," I murmured, though I didn't completely. We English kids didn't know the full horror of the concentration

camps, though I'd heard enough terrible stories from my refugee cousin Zalman, from the Polish hero Karsky, and others. But I did understand Ralph was in pain and could think only of his parents. He was the only refugee I ever heard voluntarily speak of his parents. I knew how it felt to long for a family. I wanted to hug Ralph and console him, but I was far too shy.

When the festival came to an end and it was time for the boys to leave, Alex and Cookie disappeared behind a great oak in the garden. I walked by out of curiosity and to see if Cookie was behaving herself. They were hugging each other lovingly but innocently, like children. Alex kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

"Promise you'll write twice a week, Wednesday and Sunday," I overheard him say in that precise, dry voice, now slightly husky.

"I promise, and you'll do the same, right?"

Cookie's usually harsh voice was now soft, beguiling.

"And we'll be back to visit, soon, on Succot. We'll help build a *succah* together."

"I can't wait. We'll build a beautiful leafy booth together," Cookie sighed. They gazed into each others' eyes.

Of course we talked far into the night about the boys' visit. We didn't discuss Alex, however. We knew that he was Cookie's private property and only to be discussed if she so decided. We recounted their entire visit, discussed each boy in

detail and whispered about who had made the greatest impression on us.

For once, the only one who said nothing was Cookie.

Chapter 26

Living with Teachers

"You must have a quiet place to study during these last weeks before you take Matriculation," Mrs. Rozenfeld declared. She had arrived at the hostel for the monthly visiting day. "I know these exams are hard. You need all the time and quiet, possible."

I was so relieved she understood.

"We've arranged for you to stay with two of your teachers during the week. That way you'll save the two hours you usually spend on the train. You can add those hours to your study time and you'll have a quiet place to study at night. Of course you'll come back to the hostel Friday afternoon for Shabbat and the weekend."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Rozenfeld," I said gratefully, though I was apprehensive about living with teachers. Most were so stern. They never laughed. I would hardly dare to speak for fear of saying the wrong thing. But passing Matriculation was crucial for my entire future. If I passed Matriculation, I would be eligible to continue high school and to sit for Higher School Certificate when I was eighteen. Anyone who wanted to apply to college had to pass these two examinations (plus the entrance examination for the college of her choice). Competition was fierce. Also, passing at a high level would allow me to apply for a scholarship. My parents could never afford the high school or

college fees. Students with high grades and low income were given scholarships, which paid their fees (high school was not free then), as well as a cost-of-living stipend. Failure to pass the Matriculation exam could end my academic career.

If I passed all the exams and won a scholarship, I'd be the first in our family to go to college. This would be a big honor.

I was going to live in Bishops Stortford with Miss Atzomer and Miss Scott during the few weeks before my Matric exams in June. Mrs. Kohler prepared food for me as if I was going on a long journey to a foreign country.

"Here, *kinderle*," she said, clutching an enormous jar to her huge breasts, "take this pickled herring, salami, this homemade cottage cheese, and big cake I made for you. You shouldn't be hungry during the week. Ach, those *goyishe* teachers will have no kosher food for you."

I shoved the cake and pickled herring in my briefcase and ran for the train. "Thanks for everything," I called out, "see you on Friday."

What would it be like living with two teachers, I wondered, during history class. It was a lovely day in May. Through the open windows came the thwack of the hockey sticks against hard balls and the puck of soft balls against tennis rackets. Fat bees flew lazily in and out through the classroom windows.

I walked to the teachers' house after school. They were waiting there for me, having cycled home ahead.

"What a beautiful house," I said, standing at the entrance. The two teachers smiled at me proudly from their great height.

Miss Atzomer, about forty, stood six feet tall with a long face, bushy eyebrows, big white teeth, wild black hair, and a flat chest. She wore tailored dresses with large, dark, sinister flowers on them. She galloped around on long, muscular legs or pedaled furiously to school and back on her bicycle.

Miss Scott was also tall, with pin-pricks of breasts, short, fair frizzy hair, fine gray eyes, an aquiline nose and a mouth that curled up at the ends. She seemed to be in her mid-thirties. Miss Scott wore soft wools, beads, and floaty chiffon scarves. She spoke little and did whatever Miss Atzomer told her to.

The house was modern for 1945. A dining room and French windows overlooked the prettiest English garden, a neat lawn of perfect green surrounded by roses, peonies, hyacinth, a lilac and an apple tree. The stairs and floors were thickly carpeted, a treat after the bare boards of the hostel.

Miss Atzomer showed me upstairs into a typical country spare bedroom. They all looked alike, it seemed: the same pristine single bed with a white chenille bedspread, same single window, same single chair, but of course, no table.

This house had something the others before hadn't: an indoor bathroom and toilet. There was no need for the china washbasin and jug of water and no need either for trembling visits down a muddy garden path in pitch black to the loo. In a house with one

bathroom for only three people instead of forty I felt like a princess.

I wondered whether the two teachers shared a bedroom or each had their own. Except at the Pettits', and my secret visit to Florence's bedroom at the Barnard's, I had never seen the bedrooms in any of my foster homes. I was always wildly curious but could never figure a way to see the rooms without getting caught, and no one ever offered to show me. An Englishman's home was his castle, his bedroom his deepest secret.

At school we stood up when a teacher entered the room. The first time I did so at their house, Miss Atzomer laughed.

"You don't have to stand up here," she said.

At school we never had personal conversations with a teacher. We were always separated from them in class. It was both strange and a little frightening to speak so intimately with Miss Atzomer. I felt very shy.

"We're having toad-in-the hole for dinner," Miss Atzomer said. "Is that all right with you? We'll use your kosher salami."

No teacher had ever asked my opinion, let alone permission, to do anything. I nodded, overwhelmed, unable to speak.

It had not occurred to me that we'd share my food. I thought I'd eat mine and they theirs. My kosher food would be gone in a flash if we all ate it. Perhaps they were curious as to what kosher food tasted like.

"Is there any milk in the meal?" I asked. "I can't eat milk and meat together."

I hoped I didn't sound ungracious. I felt uncomfortable explaining the reason for separating milk from meat meals.

Miss Scott said nothing but listened and watched Miss Atzomer. Her fine gray eyes moved to Miss Atzomer, then to me and back.

"Toad-in-the hole is only a flour and water batter with slices of sausage dropped in the holes of the batter and fried."

Toad-in-the-hole didn't sound appetizing to me. Even the name was repulsive. In the East End I was used to eating salami on seeded rye bread in fat sandwiches with mustard and pickles. I worried that the frying pan and the knife they used to cut the salami wouldn't be kosher--they would have been used for *trefe*, impure meat not killed by kosher laws. Maybe they would fry it in *trefe* fat, in lard, even. But what could I do?

The teachers went to such lengths to make the table pretty, that I couldn't bring myself to ask questions about cutlery, dishes, and pans. Miss Scott spread a fine beige tablecloth, then put out shiny china, silver cutlery, and even long-stemmed wine glasses. A vase of delicate freesias, nodding, stood at the table's center. Miss Atzomer poured red wine for all of us. It must have been hard to get. I'd never drunk wine before, unless you counted the two sips of Mrs. Pettit's powerful dandelion wine or the watered-down wine we'd drunk during the Passover service.

I looked nervously at the long stems of the wine glasses.

The slices of red salami marooned in the yellow batter looked odious. It was the ugliest meal I ever saw. The batter was stiff and dry, and the salami had no taste. Perhaps my tastebuds had dried up from fright. But I had been taught to finish whatever was put in front of me without complaint and this was especially true during wartime rationing.

"Mm," Miss Atzomer said, "not bad."

How could she say it was "not bad" when in fact it was terrible?

Miss Scott gazed at her with her large flower-like eyes while putting a forkful of toad-in-the-hole into her mouth. It was probably her first taste of kosher meat. I remembered how I'd looked forward to that delicious cold pork sausage I used to have at the orphanage on Sunday mornings. I'd also loved the salty taste of bacon before I stopped eating it.

I reached for my glass, misjudged the distance, and knocked it over. The red wine spread all over the beige cloth. I blushed in embarrassment. What a klutz. What a start.

"I'm terribly sorry," I stammered.

"Don't worry about it," Miss Atzomer said, mopping up the wine and carefully taking my glass away.

"We're going to the theater tonight," she said as she continued to pat down the tablecloth. "You'll be all right on your own, won't you? Don't let anyone in and be in bed by ten."

"Of course," I said. "I have masses of homework to do."

"You can take your bath tonight. We take ours in the morning."

The next night the teachers stayed at home, sitting in easy chairs, marking papers. I watched their red pencils slide across the papers as I did my homework at the dining room table. Were they marking my last homework?

Later they turned on the wireless. There was a wonderful comedy on, one I'd never heard. We had no wireless at the hostel.

"It's that man again, it's that man again. . ." was the opening song, and then Tommie Handley performed hilarious political skits and songs. Every so often a charlady came into the office saying, "Can I do yer nah, sir?" which had, I knew, some sexual innuendo, since everyone roared with laughter whenever she said it. A sexy-voiced woman came on at regular intervals purring, "Programs, chocolates, cigarettes?" the way they used to in the cinema before the war.

Miss Atzomer laughed heartily at the Tommie Handley jokes. Miss Scott looked at Miss Atzomer first to find out if it was funny. If Miss Atzomer laughed, Miss Scott smiled. I'd never heard a teacher laugh before. Listening to the wireless news and especially to that program felt almost like being in London again.

The teachers were so sophisticated, almost like Mummy's friends, though far more educated. They treated me like a

grownup. They went out several nights a week to plays, concerts, debates, lectures and films yet they were so solicitous. "You'll be all right?" they always asked. I always assured them I would be. I liked having the house to myself. I could imagine it was mine.

"I never knew teachers led such an exciting life," I told Doreen Bird, my only school friend, as I stirred my tea. We'd found a cheap tea room in Bishops Stortford, Lamb's Tea Room, and loved to go there after school.

"No wonder Miss Scott yawns so often."

"We'll have a pot of tea and crumpets, please," we said like real grownups, to the white-aproned-and-capped waitress.

"I thought teachers just stayed home every night and marked our homework. They're all spinsters so I assumed they had no social life," Doreen said.

"Oh, no, Miss Atzomer and Miss Scott go out more than people in London. They told me they even do some acting in amateur theatricals."

"Are they friendly?" Doreen asked, her fair hair falling around her elfin face.

"Yes, although Miss Atzomer does have a temper. Sometimes she's really bitchy. I've even heard her shout at Miss Scott. Miss Scott just makes goo-goo eyes at Miss Atzomer, as if she were a naughty little girl."

"Just the same, I'm glad I live with my Mum and Dad," Doreen

said. "Well, my Dad when he's home on leave. See you tomorrow,"

We parted outside Lamb's, Doreen loping toward her home in Bishops Stortford. She turned once and waved.

Since I didn't have to hurry for the train and spend an hour traveling to the hostel, I had more time after school. Miss Atzomer didn't check closely what time I got home, so I frequently popped into the flicks. I saw every movie I could. Curled up in the dark, I gazed adoringly at the black and white screen. My favorite film stars were Leslie Howard, Laurence Olivier, Jean Gabin, Margaret Lockwood, Rex Harrison, and Wendy Hiller. Their English was so delightful. I wished I spoke upper-class English. I could do it if I tried, but not for long.

Most films were about war heroes and heroines, escaping Jewish refugees, underground fighters, wicked Nazis, and brave prisoners. Some films were glamorous, cheerful pictures about rich people "managing" through the war with "only" one servant, which made an East Ender like me laugh. Many films were tragic, with even the rich losing a lover, son, or husband in the war with the Nazis, or a cynic turning into a romantic hero, like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*. I'd sit weeping in the dark, enjoying myself tremendously. The British discouraged the expression of emotions, but alone in the dark cinema, I could feel, laugh, and cry freely.

Since the May 8th liberation, the newsreels had been showing ghastly pictures of emaciated, diseased Jews coming out of

concentration camps. They were unable to stand alone, dragging their feet, their skeletal arms draped around two strong people. Other newsreels shows naked Jews starved to death, randomly thrown like rubbish onto huge piles of other Jewish corpses. I was horrified and dismayed. I cried. Were these the Jews conspiring to rule the world as the Nazis claimed? It was the Nazis, actively aided by many countries, who'd had this plan. I wondered why countries, America and Britain included, refused Jews asylum precisely at the time they desperately needed to escape.

Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labor, was openly anti-Semitic. Neither Bevin nor Roosevelt wanted to be "saddled" with Jewish refugees. They didn't want Palestine to become a Jewish state, even though the British and the United Nations had promised the Jews a state--as if it was theirs to promise in the first place. God had promised it to us three thousand years ago. Jews had lived in the land of Israel for at least six thousand years. The Kingdom of David had stretched in the west from the Mediterranean east to Jordan and in the south, skirted Egypt.

Seeing the plight of world Jewry with so many countries that could have helped, doing nothing, I became embittered. The war had changed nothing. Jews were still discriminated against.

That week we had mock Matriculation exams. Afterwards, Doreen and I went to Lamb's.

"How d'you think you did?" I asked Doreen, sipping tea.

"I think I did terribly," she groaned. "And you?"

"Not so bad," I said. "Could have been worse."

I didn't want Doreen to feel badly.

I wrote in my diary, "Did a spiffing, smashing good essay in history. Hope I'll get a distinction or honors."

"I just love going to a restaurant by ourselves" I said, biting into a wafer-thin slice of white bread and butter. The thin smear of salty New Zealand butter tasted delicious.

It was Friday. There was just enough time after tea to catch the train to the hostel in time for Shabbat. I found Selma, Helga and Cookie who were already on the train. We chattered all the way to Great Chesterford.

I spent the weekend at the hostel and returned to Bishops Stortford on Monday. After school I went back to Miss Atzomer and Miss Scott's house.

As soon as I entered their door, Miss Atzomer said to me, "I'm afraid it's difficult for us to stick to your dietary rules, so you'll be billeted at a Mrs. Schenker's until after your exams. The Schenkers are Jewish Londoners, evacuated to Bishops Stortford. Mrs. Schenker keeps kosher so you won't have any problems with the food and they live right opposite the school. It'll be very quiet there, so you can study for Matriculation."

The Wandering Jew, I thought, still a nuisance.

This would be my ninth or tenth foster home since the war began. I felt like a parcel shipped from one address to another. At least I'd return to the hostel on weekends. That was my safe and secure haven.

"I'll be sorry to leave, you've been so nice to me."

"Quite all right. We have a surprise for you tonight."

That evening Miss Atzomer and Miss Scott took me to a concert given by the Bishops Stortford Boys' College Orchestra. People never made a fuss of me when I arrived, it seemed, but always celebrated when I left. Mummy was like that, too.

The boys in the audience were smashing, so handsome and well-groomed. One stared hard at me all evening. I gazed back under my lashes, while the two teachers stared intently at the orchestra. To my surprise Doreen was in the orchestra. I didn't know she was a musician. She played the violin passionately. I decided I'd nominate her for prefect next term.

"You were smashing," I said to her next day at the Lamb. "I didn't know you could play the violin like that."

"I'm a musical genius, didn't you know?" she laughed, but I could see she was flattered.

Doreen swallowed her food and said in a low voice, "I heard a terrible story from my friend Bridget."

She bent closer across the table. Neither of us put our elbows on the table.

"What. . .?" I craned toward her, stretching my neck.

"Her sister Mabel was found beaten up by a Yank and he tried to push her down a sewage drain."

"Oh, horrible! Are you sure? They all seem so nice. It makes me a bit scared of Yanks. That's the second bad story I've heard about them this month."

I told her about the racist Yank on the train.

"I'm not all that keen on negroes myself, but I didn't know the Americans hated them so much," she said.

"Well not all Americans are like that. And Doreen, negroes are human, just like you and me."

Doreen sniffed, the polite English form of disagreement.

I didn't mention anti-Semitism to Doreen. She was a lovely friend but a gentile. She might not believe me if I told her about Mosley and the Cable Street Battle and about how England wouldn't let Jewish refugees into Palestine. She might not care. I didn't want to find out. I enjoyed her friendship.

Doreen poured us each some more tea from the fat white pot between us. She took a slice of the thin white bread and butter cut into triangles. Doreen's teeth marks left a half-circle in her triangle, making it look like a wigwam with a round door.

"I write to a Tommy I've never met and to a Yank air pilot from the air base in Stansted who calls me `Toots.' Boy, can he jitterbug," she laughed. Then her face grew serious. "But I've been going with an English fellow for three months now, so I'm not so interested in other men."

She lowered her eyes, her fair eyelashes fringing her cheek, then looked me full in the face to see my reaction. I smiled. I knew she was serious about this man. I wished I had a boyfriend.

It was my last night at Miss Atzomer and Miss Scott's house. I'd gone to bed, but I got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. I padded barefoot along the thickly carpeted hall. From an open door a shaft of golden light fell across the hallway. I heard soft murmurings from the room. As I passed the door, I saw the two tall teachers, Miss Atzomer in pajamas, Miss Scott in a long, silky nightgown, standing locked in a close embrace, blonde and dark heads together.

I thought it was very sweet, their feeling so affectionate toward each other. I smiled to myself in the dark.

27

War Wounded

Mrs. Schenker, about forty, was plump, with a halo of pale blond hair, thick blond lashes over calm blue eyes, and pale, perfect skin. She walked the way we girls had been taught: shoulders back, neck long, breasts and head high. I visited her Friday afternoon before returning by train to the refugee hostel. She lived right opposite my new high school in Bishops Stortford.

I followed her into a modern living room, so different from the mahogany furniture, carved piano, and blue velvet curtains at my home in London. Mrs. Schenker's living room was filled with light, which fell on the soft gray sofa and carpet and elegant pale pink curtains.

"I understand you need a quiet place to stay until your Matriculation exams," Mrs. Schenker said.

She examined me from head to toe, taking in my navy gym tunic, beige shirt, green and red-striped tie, lisle stockings and stout brogues.

I seemed to pass her inspection.

"The refugee hostel where I stay is so noisy I can't study. I'd stay with you Monday to Friday and go back to the hostel on Friday afternoons for the weekend."

She nodded. "I'll ask my husband tonight whether you can stay. Come by on Monday."

She was cool but not unfriendly. I imagined her on a ship

going down in a furious storm. While everyone else was shrieking in terror, she'd be organizing the lifeboats.

On Monday morning before school I dropped in. A lean man in shirtsleeves, his gray trousers held up by suspenders, stood beside Mrs. Schenker.

"This is my husband Ben," she said. "He says you can stay for a month."

"Howdo," he said abruptly. He gave my hand one shake up, one down, then dropped it. He was thin and balding and wore steel-rimmed glasses. His sharp gray eyes seemed to take me all in, to snap a photograph of me in a second. Then he turned and loped quickly out of the room like a grizzly bear. I saw that they were both kindly, shy people--so shy it was amazing they ever got married.

I felt very grownup arranging for my new quarters alone, and only sixteen.

"Here's your bedroom," Mrs. Schenker said, opening a solid wooden door. "Dinner's at six."

Almost everything about my room looked familiar: the narrow bed, the single window looking onto the back garden, and the washstand with the china jug of water in the usual china basin. What set this room apart was the marble shelf on which stood three ceramic jars of cream. Was this how Mrs. Schenker kept her angelic skin?

I closed the door, took off my shoes and padded softly in stockinged feet over to the gleaming jars. I silently opened the first. The screw-on top, to my delight, was all gold, the jar itself white, with gold writing on the outside. It was far more glamorous than the ordinary Pond's jar of face cream which I'd used secretly every night since I'd been eleven. These creams must be expensive, I thought. Cautiously I turned the gold lid, which made a faint grating sound, as if protesting. I was afraid of being caught by Mrs. Schenker. I still remembered the fright I'd had five years before at the Pettit's, rummaging through their bedroom drawer.

The lid was off. I put my nose to the cream and smelled it. A tiny dab got on the end of my nose and I hastily wiped it off. How deliciously feminine and cool it smelled, like lily-of-the-valley. I stole a tiny dab with my little finger, trying not to leave a dent, and rubbed it on the back of my left hand. It was the first thing I'd ever stolen. I felt delicious pleasure. I would see in the morning if my hand was miraculously transformed into Mrs. Schenker's alabaster skin. If only I could have skin hers. I imagined how beautiful Mrs. Schenker must have been as a girl of sixteen, my age now, young and slender, with her flawless skin, golden hair and blue eyes. She must have been exquisite.

The first morning at the Schenkers I had corn flakes, a boiled egg, toast, marmalade, and tea for breakfast. An egg for dinner was a wonderful treat, since we were rationed to one a

week, usually for a dinner. Cereal, toast and marmalade, too, made it a feast. Usually I had only cereal with a little milk and no sugar. It was the best breakfast I'd had since the war began. I wondered if the Schenkers bought food on the black market or whether they were just spoiling me.

At night I slept on a soft bed and examined the creams.

I tried tiny amounts of the first cream for three nights, I couldn't see any change in the skin on my hand. I dared not take any more in case Mrs. Schenker noticed the tiny holes in the cream, so I stopped using the first jar. The second smelled more like roses with a slightly minty scent. I dipped my finger in lightly and put a tiny dab on my cheek. I'd try it each night for three nights and see if there was any change. If not, I'd try the third jar.

Mr. Schenker went to London on Mondays and came back for the weekend, away from the bombing. The couple still had a house in London and he had an accounting business there. Mrs. Schenker stayed in Bishops Stortford all the time. I wondered what it would have been like to be evacuated with my own mother and father, like some children. Unless forced to by the government, my parents would never leave London or their hairdressing business.

The Schenker home was orderly and quiet and I studied intensively for the upcoming exams. I missed Mr. Shapiro's help,

but he'd left me with good study habits and more self-confidence.

One Monday I was eating porridge at the hostel before catching the train. Nurse handed me a skinny sandwich for lunch. Mrs. Kohler appeared, filling the door, as broad as she was tall.

"Here's the sixteen shillings for your billeting money. Give it to Mrs. Schenker every Monday," she said and went out.

A sudden thought came to me. "Where does the money for the hostel come from?" I asked Nurse.

"We get some money from London from Rabbi Munk's congregation in Golders Green and we're subsidized by the Ministry of Health," she said.

"Who pays the staff?" I asked.

"The staff is all considered to be doing war work, so we're paid by the Ministry of Health."

"Is it Rabbi Munk's congregation in London that gives the hostel children their sixpence a week pocket money?"

"Right."

So that's where Selma got money to buy me bath salts for my birthday present last year. She must have saved a long time.

"Rabbi Munk and his congregation are largely German refugees. I suppose they feel a bond with the German Jewish children here. Some lucky parents came to England from Germany with their children, though many parents lost their children to the Nazis. Almost all the children here lost their parents. But

don't mention it to them. They all think their parents are alive. Thank God you were born in England," Nurse said.

"It's funny being the only English girl in the hostel," I said. "The kids think I'm something special being an English born Jew."

"You are," Nurse said. "You don't know how lucky you are. One of the women in Rabbi Munk's congregation was forced by the Nazis to choose which of her twin girls was to live. She chose the less favorite daughter so she couldn't accuse herself of favoritism. It was the Nazis' favorite trick to make parents choose which of the two would live."

I shivered, tugging at my school hat. We were punished if we didn't wear it with our uniform. I ran for the train, thinking if my grandmother hadn't left Poland years ago and was forced by the Nazis to choose between Mummy and Aunt Regina, I know who she would have chosen.

Since the Germans had surrendered to the Allies in Italy and to the Russians in Berlin in early May 1945, a huge number of Tommies, our British soldiers, had come home. So far we'd seen mainly Yanks. Bishops Stortford was now full of rough talking, rough clad British soldiers as well as the smoothly dressed, smooth talking Yanks. And suddenly there was a third kind of soldier, a kind I'd never seen before, an alien-looking group dressed in brilliant blue cotton suits. They moved slowly, always

in a group, like a school of blue seals on land, out of their element. Some had frightened eyes and some had frightening eyes.

The British wounded had come home.

I wondered why they were dressed in such a bright blue. It made them so conspicuous. Every day at four o'clock this blue group of wounded soldiers stood on the pavement opposite Hertfordshire and Essex High School and silently watched us students pouring out of the red brick school buildings, running past the playing fields, under the stone arch and into the street. The soldiers never crossed the street. They never spoke to us schoolgirls nor to each other. Although they were British, they behaved more like foreigners who felt unwelcome. They stood, smoked, stared, and shifted from one foot to the other. It felt eerie to be watched by these men.

"Why do they stand and stare at us?" I asked Selma.

"Maybe wounded soldiers have a harder time getting dates," she said.

"They're not going to get any dates here," I said.

"Maybe they're just starved for the sight of a woman."

"D'you think we look like women in these shapeless uniforms?" I said.

"They must find something interesting about us," she said. "Poor fellows."

Selma seemed to have superior knowledge of men. She didn't find them as amazing and curious as I did.

Every day the walking wounded stared at us, moving nothing except their eyes or their blue-cuffed hands as they lifted their white cigarettes up and down to their lips, smoke puffing out of their mouths, like mechanical dolls. We became so used to them standing there that we stopped taking any notice of them.

Once a week an open air market was held in Bishops Stortford. I was paying for a suspender belt at one of the stalls when a good looking redheaded bloke came up to me.

"Buying suspenders to keep up your morale?"

"I just want them to hold up my stockings," I laughed.

It was most personal for a man to mention a girl's underwear. I should have been insulted, but he was so unaffected, boyish and sweet. I'd have liked to ruffle his hair.

As I was leaving, I noticed a wounded soldier in his brilliant blue cotton suit standing nearby and staring at me. Somehow I sensed that this particular soldier would follow me so I walked faster. He was suddenly at my side.

"Trying to run away?" he asked. "Everyone tries to run away from a wounded soldier. Even children won't speak to us. We're outcasts."

He was in his twenties, tall and slim. Thick blond hair fell into his eyes, which were a piercing, hurt blue. He had medals on his thin chest. He was handsome and glamorous but all I felt was panic.

"I've been all over the world, to Europe, Egypt and other parts of Africa, and I've been wounded in every limb," he said, as we sat in Lamb's Tea Room. How did a wound look? I was afraid to see one. Was it bloody, gory, gruesome? I couldn't see any wounds on him which was a relief. They must have been on his chest or back.

"My name is George Frederick Wrigley. Will you have tea with me?" he asked.

"Yes," I said in a small voice.

I walked fast to get to Lamb's Tea Room without being seen. But the streets were almost deserted. Everyone was at home, having tea. It would be a treat to be taken out to tea, like being back in London. He walked as fast as when he'd caught up with me the first time.

We sipped strong, steaming tea with milk and ate scones. He had good table manners. His hands and nails were clean. Of course they were. He couldn't work.

"I hope you're going to meet me again," he said, as his face crumpled into wrinkles. I was terrified he'd cry. He touched my hand, a feather touch as if afraid I'd brush him off. I pulled my hand away in case someone I knew saw me. He was so young and good looking. His blue eyes pleaded. Here was a man who had fought against the Nazis for his country and for me, and now that he was wounded, nobody wanted him. I felt terribly sorry for him. I had to show him someone cared.

"I was planning to see *Wuthering Heights* on Monday. Would you like to come?" I asked him finally, in a low voice.

I was seeing the film anyway. It would be dark inside so no one would see us and I wouldn't have to talk to him during the film. I wouldn't see him again after that.

"I'd love to," he said simply. "Shall I meet you outside the Phoenix at four?"

I nodded.

"By the way, most people call me Freddy," he said. "What's your name?"

When I told him Gilda, he said, "That's beautiful."

"Good-bye, Freddy, see you Monday."

He took my hand and stroked it as if it were precious. His hand looked thin and pale over my tanned hand.

I didn't tell him I was Jewish. I never told people I was Jewish until I was sure they liked me. The nicest of English gentiles often turned out to be anti-Semitic. I'd met enough fascists in my life to know they could be vicious. I always tested gentiles first, to find out where they stood--to find out where I stood with them. If they proved to be favorable or even indifferent, I'd tell them I was Jewish.

Outside the tea room I looked around to see if anyone from school had seen me with Freddy. I'd already been in trouble once for writing that anonymous love letter to Joseph Singer. I hadn't minded when I had been sent to Coventry, but going out with a man

and especially a soldier, even a wounded one, was undoubtedly a worse offense than writing to a boy.

I wasn't allowed to go out with men. The hostel would have disapproved of me going out with any man, especially a gentile. He didn't look Jewish. He didn't have the intense, introspective look, the slight anxiety in the eyes of a Jew. My school, though Christian, would have been even more scandalized.

I might have been attracted to him if he'd been Jewish and not wounded. Actually, I didn't know if I wasn't attracted to him because I was afraid of being caught, because he wasn't my type (tall, dark and strong,) or because he was wounded. Perhaps I was attracted to him and refused to admit it. *Because* he was wounded I felt I ought to go out with him. He'd fought for me. We were always being told, "support our brave troops." We knitted, rolled bandages, served in canteens for them and wrote to them. He was a kind of hero and I owed it to him. But I didn't want to go out with a wounded man.

Wrigley was a distinctly Christian name. I'd only see him once, I told myself angrily. I'd get into trouble if I were seen talking to a soldier.

Friday I ran over the grassy grounds of the school and dashed out under the arch, hockey stick on my shoulder, heels flying to catch the four-thirty train back to the hostel. Suddenly I saw Freddy standing among the silent crowd of wounded soldiers. He'd never been with them before. To my horror, he

began to cross the invisible line that had kept the wounded on their side of the street and we healthy girls on ours. All the local girls from the school had disappeared. I ran down the street and gestured for him to follow. Mrs. Schenker might be looking out of her window. The wounded soldiers stood almost outside her gate.

"I'll get into trouble if I'm seen talking to a soldier," I whispered "You'd better not wait for me there. My foster mother lives right opposite."

The streets of Bishops Stortford were alive with teachers and students who might report me. Looking around I saw everyone had disappeared, but I was fraught with nerves. Freddy was blissfully unaware of the problem he posed for me. I glanced over my shoulder several times as we walked to the station at the end of the town. The street was empty.

"I had to see you," Freddy said. "I might be a bit late on Monday because I have a medical exam. I didn't know how else to reach you. Will you please come to tea again with me now? Please?"

I looked around quickly. How had the whole school vanished so fast?

"I can't. I have to catch the next train to Great Chesterford." I didn't tell him I lived in a Jewish refugee hostel. "If you like you can walk with me to the station."

"I'd love to. I'm going on the train, too."

I hoped he wasn't going to Great Chesterford. Probably he was going to London, in the opposite direction.

We walked quietly along the tree lined street, heavy with green foliage. The early summer day was fresh, a light breeze ruffled Freddy's blond hair. I felt grown-up, walking with a soldier.

"I'm twenty-six," he told me.

He was ten years older than me, too old.

Freddy was gentlemanly like my father, who always walked on the outside of my mother on the street. Apart from his being wounded all over, I knew nothing about him. Anyway, I thought, I won't be seeing him after the cinema on Monday.

Selma stood outside the red brick station waiting for me. When she saw me walking and talking to Freddy, her mouth fell open. None of us from the hostel had ever talked to a wounded soldier before. I suppose the sight of them while we were losing the war might have been demoralizing to the public. Perhaps they'd been hidden in hospitals all this time. There must have been some with missing limbs or blind or burned who were still in hospital. We were only seeing the *walking* wounded. Now that we were winning, we could show some of our wounds and wounded, was that it?

"Why do you wear such bright blue uniforms?" I asked.

"They show we're wounded and that we're entitled to certain benefits like free train travel. We don't have to carry any

identification. People can see us from a mile away," he said. "If we were in civvies, people couldn't always tell that we're wounded. You can't always see our wounds. We'd have civilians handing us white feathers saying we were cowards and asking why weren't we fighting. So the bright blue identifies us."

We entered the station. There was no one from school there except Selma, Cookie, and Helga. Selma stared at Freddy the way the wounded soldiers stared at us every day.

"Selma," I said, "this is Freddy."

"How do you do," he said gravely.

"H-h-hello," Selma stuttered.

Freddy made no effort to take Selma's hand as he had mine.

As our train puffed in he said, "You know what. . .?"

"Don't tell me you're going on the same train," I said.

We all laughed and my tension eased. The train was safer territory than the street.

"I'm going to Cambridge," he said.

What a relief. Cambridge was past Great Chesterford. As we three got on, I could see Cookie and Helga getting on the train much further up. Thank goodness Cookie hadn't seen us--I'd never hear the end of it. She wouldn't tell on me though.

Selma, Freddy and I chatted companionably about school, the war, and films, until Selma and I got off at Great Chesterford. From the platform we waved good-bye to Freddy. I was glad he didn't mention we were meeting on Monday. This was one of the few

things I couldn't tell Selma. I was afraid she'd disapprove.

"What do you think of him?" I asked Selma, as we walked home.

"He's okay for a *goy*, even handsome, but I wouldn't go out with him," she said.

"Why not?"

"You should only go out with someone you can marry. You can't marry a gentile, it's not allowed. You have to go out only with Jewish men. Each Jew who marries a gentile destroys all their Jewish descendants. If we all did that, the Jews would disappear. I'd never marry a gentile so I'd never date one either. Nor should you."

"But he's wounded," I said. "Have *rachmonos*, pity."

"He'll find some nice little *shiksa* who'll be delighted to go out with him. Leave him alone."

"He won't leave *me* alone," I said darkly.

She shrugged her slim shoulders.

On Monday Freddy was standing outside the Phoenix, looking to the right and left. I'd changed out of my hot school uniform and left the clothes in my locker. I wore a pale blue frock as if I were wounded, too. Lightly wounded.

"You look very pretty," Freddy said, when he saw me. He seized my hand. I looked around quickly. Had anyone seen?

"Two balcony seats, please," he said at the ticket window.

I'd never sat in the balcony before. I was looking forward to it. Balcony seats, at two shillings and ninepence, must have been a lot of money for a wounded soldier. Perhaps he got the seats cheaper for being wounded. I imagined the wounded were paid less than those who were fighting.

We were almost alone on the dark balcony. Only a Yank and his girl were in the last row, kissing. I hadn't known it would be so empty. It was four o'clock. Schoolgirls were at home having tea with their mothers, most adults were at work, and Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon bloomed onto the screen. I was rapt with joy.

In the dark, Freddy took my hand in his. After about half an hour he slowly raised my hand to his lips and kissed it cautiously. His lips were cool, dry. I wondered if my hand was softer and smelled nice where I'd tried Mrs. Schenker's creams.

No man had ever kissed my hand before and it was a most romantic gesture, the kind I had dreamed about, but not with Freddy.

He offered me a Craven "A" cigarette from the red tin box with the smiling black cat on it. I shook my head. Heathcliffe was running away from Cathy to make his fortune in Australia, because he thought she loved another man. Who wanted to smoke?

"Really, you don't smoke?" he whispered. "D'you mind if I do?"

"I don't mind."

"May I put my arm round you?" he asked.

"If you like," I said.

I didn't see why not. It wouldn't mean anything to me, I thought. He put his left arm round my shoulder and squeezed it, hard.

"My left arm is strong, my right is wounded," he said.

No man had ever put his arm round me. I was stiff, tense.

Freddy pulled me to him and kissed my cheek.

I felt myself flush in the dark and pulled away, "Don't."

Then he said, "Gilda, I'm sorry, I made a mistake. You're not pretty, you're beautiful. I'm in love with you."

He took me in his arms and tried to kiss my mouth. I struggled against him but his body covered mine and held me down. His left, strong arm was around me pulling me close. I could feel his medals pressing into my skin and his heart beating against mine. He was breathing hard. My own heart was racing with fright and anger.

"Don't fight me," he pleaded. "Let me kiss you, I love you."

All my teenage years I'd dreamed of romance but not like this.

"Please, Freddy, don't," I said, but he showered my face with kisses. I didn't know what to do, torn between not wanting to hurt him, not wanting to attract attention, and anger at his taking advantage of me.

Behind us, the Yank and his girl behind were necking like

crazy.

"Stop it at once," I said angrily. I pushed him away, hard.

He fell back into his seat. The struggle may have tired him. "Don't be angry," he said softly, "I'll stop."

I was breathing hard, very upset. I wished he hadn't said he loved me. It was going to be harder to break off with him. Though I admired the way he spoke to me, so straight and honestly, I couldn't kiss a man without knowing him, without feeling some affection toward him. Why couldn't I be as straight and honest with him and tell him I didn't want to go out with a wounded man?

Then he whispered, "You know what I'd like to do, I'd like to squeeze you to death!"

To death! He may have meant that as a compliment, but it scared me. I realized I knew absolutely nothing about Freddy except that he was wounded, that I pitied him, and that he frightened me at the same time he attracted me. I *thought* he attracted me, I wasn't sure. I was so confused. He kept his arm round my shoulder until the end. I didn't want to create a scene or attract attention so I stayed quiet.

Afterward, he walked me through the deserted streets to Mrs. Schenker's. We came to the brown gate in front of the garden. He kept me there, making conversation about nothing. I knew he was trying to make me stay longer so he could kiss me. I was scared. He put his arms around me but I ducked out of them. I

opened the gate and strode quickly up the stone path to the Schenker's house. I hoped they hadn't been watching us through the bay window. They might send me away if they had. I needed their quiet home until the exams were over.

"Gilda," he called, "Come back a minute."

I went back feeling safe with the gate between us.

"Here's your address back. You only went out with me out of pity."

He thrust the paper with my address back at me.

"You don't want me because I'm crocked up. I'm no good," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous, you're as good as any man," I protested, before I ran up the garden path to the safe house.

I wasn't sure, though, if I meant what I'd said. Freddy was intelligent and handsome. There were probably lots of girls who would like him. But I needed someone big and strong who'd protect me. Freddy couldn't protect me. He needed someone to protect him.

I opened the front door and glanced back to see if Freddy was still there. He was gone. Mrs. Schenker switched off the wireless. Her blonde angel face turned on me like a light. Her golden eyelashes blinked rapidly.

"Peace has been declared. We've had victory in Europe and two days' holiday," she said calmly.

"Whoopee," I screamed. I seized Mrs. Schenker round the

waist and danced that calm lady round in a jig which she followed with dignity.

"Don't get carried away, there's still the war in Asia and the Pacific," she said coolly, detaching herself, a faint spot of pink glowing in her pale cheeks. Mr. Schenker loped in from the garden.

"There's a guy out the back for you," he said, as if it were an everyday occurrence. "I invited him in to celebrate. I've got champagne."

I was astonished to hear Mr. Schenker use the American word "guy," and that he allowed this "guy" to call for me at the house. He must have suspended all rules because of the peace.

I ran outside again. Freddy stood there looking like a naughty boy. Behind his head fireworks soared into the sky and burst in the air, celebrating peace. I turned my face up to them in delight. Church bells, silent for six years, clanged in joyous cacophony. People poured into the streets, singing, dancing, screaming and laughing, hugging and kissing each other. I wanted to rush out and dance with them. Freddy ignored them all.

"I'm sorry for behaving like a fool," he said, while people went wild in the street. "Can I have your address again?"

He knew the address. It was only an excuse to see me again.

"We've won the war in Europe," I shouted over the bells, the shouting, singing and dancing breaking out all around us.

A fresh spurt of fireworks flared into the sky and burst with a bang and a clatter into joyous smithereens of gold.

"Come inside. Let's celebrate. We've got champagne."

Freddy pulled up the bright blue sleeve of his right arm.

I saw a huge jagged pink scar shaped like a thick bolt of lightning against his pale white skin. It ran from the inside of his wrist to the crook of his elbow, two inches wide, a foot long.

"Celebrate peace? What good does peace do me?" Freddy said bitterly. "All my muscles are gone. I'll never be able to work again."

Though I felt deep compassion for Freddy, I could hardly contain my own excitement at the visions of peace and freedom. Unlike Freddy I felt that life, like the golden fireworks, was joyously exploding all around me.

28

Celebration

"The war's over, the war's over," the children in the hostel shouted. We danced and hugged and kissed each other. The Kohlers and Nurse smiled and sang all day. We had a special meat meal to celebrate and a special prayer meeting to thank God for saving our lives. We tried not to think of the lives lost. We didn't know much about the dead and wounded. The wardens protected the hostel children from bad news. We children scarcely saw a newspaper or heard the wireless. I alone had seen the newsreels about the concentration camp victims, but I could not tell the others. Their own parents were among the dead.

With the news of victory in Europe everyone in the refugee hostel felt tremendous relief. Even though we lived on free ground in England, we felt liberated. Insulated as we were from the daily bombings in London and other cities, the shadow of Nazi invasion had hovered over us for six years. Planes in the sky, searchlights, blackouts, ration cards, the orphans, and the hostel itself were all reminders of war.

Surely the children at the hostel wondered where their parents were. There were no letters for them via the Red Cross. Only Cookie knew her father had escaped to Shanghai, her mother to Santiago. None of the others dared ask, though their eyes held mute hope.

Selma was gay even though she didn't know her parents' fate.

Perhaps she'd already accepted the worst.

"Let's do something daring to celebrate victory," she said.

We were lying, as usual, on our army cots in the big girls' room. Hands under our heads, we dreamt about peace, romance and adventure. The sun streamed through the great picture windows of the attic, spilling over the window seat where Selma and I had so often talked.

"I know what we can do to celebrate," I said, "There's another hostel in Cambridge. Perhaps they're having a celebration party for peace. Let's cycle there. It's only eleven miles away."

"Good idea. There are older boys in that hostel, not little drips of eight and nine like the boys here," Selma said.

"I'm ready," I answered, jumping up. "We just have to ask Nurse if we can go."

The news of peace had mellowed Nurse. Her soldier-husband would soon be back and there was no danger now from bombs.

"Of course you can go. Have a good time," she said. "Just be back for supper."

We mounted our bicycles. There were few cars and no danger in two young girls riding the highways alone. We were one happy nation, united even more in peace than we had been in war. Everyone helped everyone else. We found that out when I got a flat tire and a Yank in a jeep stopped, jumped out, and helped us repair it. We thanked him and rode on.

"We don't know anyone at this hostel. I hope they don't throw us out," I said, as we pedaled madly through the countryside, our hair flying in the wind. "I'm getting hungry."

"You're always hungry," Selma laughed.

"I could use a nice mashed potato sandwich," I said.

We were cycling down a steep hill, when Selma fell off her bike. Her leg oozed blood.

"We're nearly there, can you make it?" I asked.

"Of course. It's only a scratch."

But her leg was full of blood, dirt and gravel.

Cambridge was full of students in flowing black gowns, walking or riding bicycles, their robes billowing around them. Many groups were celebrating in the streets.

We leaned our bikes against the wall and entered the Cambridge hostel. I walked, Selma limped.

"Let's find a bathroom to clean your leg," I said.

A dozen or so girls and boys, ages eighteen, nineteen and twenty, were milling about in the foyer. A short, sturdy fellow with red hair came over to us.

"Hello, are you here to celebrate the victory? Where are you from?"

I nodded. "We're from the Great Chesterford hostel, eleven miles from here. My friend Selma scraped her leg. Where is the bathroom, please?"

A lean, muscular boy, as loose-limbed as any Yank came up to

us.

"Oh, you've hurt your leg," he said to Selma. "Let me clean it for you. Come with me."

He took Selma by the arm and led her away. She looked up at him, a little bemused. I could see why.

The young man was over six feet tall with slim hips, a shock of straight black hair, quizzical eyebrows, light skin and blue eyes. His long fingers were blunt at the end, his feet long and narrow. He wore a fisherman's high-neck jersey and tight trousers.

As he spoke to Selma he stared into her eyes. Her upturned face was for once animated. She shook her long hair back off her face. I saw his eyes quickly admire her full breasts and slim waist. He led her down a hallway toward a bathroom or a kitchen. There would be a nurse, somewhere.

"We've heard of the hostel at Great Chesterford," said the young man who had greeted us. "I'm Wolfgang. Come and meet the others. This is Danny."

"You're just in time for lunch," Danny said.

He was a nice looking boy, about seventeen, with dark straight hair and large brown eyes. He wore baggy tweeds.

After lunch Danny said, "Let's put on some records and dance."

He wound up the gramophone, put on some music, and we danced the foxtrot, waltzes. We even jitterbugged a little. Though he

was no Norma Gelkoff or Anita, for that matter, I danced every dance with Danny. I felt so grown up.

"I'm going to be an accountant," he told me proudly.

How dreary that sounded. Everything after the war was going to be dull, I thought. The war had been terrible but constantly exciting. I had seen newsreels and films about Nazi invasions, Allied bombings, heroism, miraculous rescues and escapes, Dunkirk, Rommel chased through the desert and more. When we won a battle we cheered. When we lost a battle we cheered each other up. But we always knew we would win. We had to. It was exciting except for the terrible stories about the Nazi massacres of Jews. With peace, I imagined everything would become dull. And I would have to leave the hostel. I hated to leave but I was excited about going back to London.

As I danced with Danny I realized I hadn't seen Selma for some time. I looked round for her over Danny's shoulder. She stood at the far side of the common room, near the French windows that led into the garden. Her leg was bandaged. She was talking to the tall fellow who had looked after her. I looked at my watch.

"My goodness it's five, we have to be home by six for supper," I told Danny.

"Your friend seems to be all right now. Sorry you have to go. I'll walk you to your bike," he said.

I beckoned to Selma across the room. She walked slowly

toward me still talking to the man. They followed me outside where our bicycles stood against the wall. When they reached me Selma said, "Victor, this is my friend Gilda, from the hostel."

"How do you do?" he said gravely, his eyes still on Selma.

This is it, I thought. She'd finally met her *beshert,* her fated one. Many Jews believed all marriages were made in heaven and that couples were destined for each other.

We both mounted our bicycles. "Thanks for a lovely afternoon," I said to Danny.

"I'll see you soon," I heard Victor say to Selma.

He rested his hand on her arm as if she already belonged to him. Selma blushed and looked down, but her face was, for once, radiant. I realized I'd hardly ever seen her happy.

"Goodbye, come again, while we're still here," Danny said. "Now the war's over, we expect they'll soon disband this hostel."

"Where will you go?" I asked. His parents had been killed by the Nazis.

"I have an uncle in London, he's going to adopt me," Danny said.

"Where will the others go?" I asked.

"If they're lucky, they'll find relatives or foster-parents." He frowned. "Anyone eighteen or over is on their own."

"So," I teased, as we pedalled home, a cool breeze fanning

our faces, "have you met your *beshert*?"

"He was so kind. He bathed my leg and bandaged it himself. He'll make a good husband and father. I'm going to marry him," Selma said calmly. Her leg didn't seem to hurt her any longer.

"What's he like?"

"He was born in Germany like me, lost his parents, and he wants to go into the scrap metal business with his brother."

"How old is he?"

"Eighteen," she said.

"You're only fifteen, Selma."

"I'll marry in two years when I'm seventeen or eighteen," Selma said. "It depends partly when the war in Asia ends."

"Does he know he's going to marry you?" I teased.

She just smiled her Mona Lisa smile as we cycled home. My bottom was sore but I was grinning, too. I had my reasons. The war was over in Europe, the weather was gorgeous, and I was doing very well on my exams. In ten days I'd be finished with exams and would be going home to London for good. A little shiver went through me.

Tea with the Editor

The next morning two letters arrived.

One was a blue airmail letter from a friend in America, whom I'd contacted through a pen-pal organization. We all wrote to lonely British and American soldiers whom we'd never met, and to kids our age in other countries. I enjoyed writing to strangers, hearing about their totally different lives and thoughts. One soldier had written to me about his extreme shyness and fear, yet hope, of meeting girls. I wrote back trying to give him confidence.

I'd also become pen-pals with Frank Robinson, the young man who had sent a letter to the London issue of *Life Magazine*. Frank's letter had said that racism was undemocratic. I'd written a letter back to the Letters Editor agreeing with Frank. The magazine forwarded my letter to Frank and we began a correspondence.

I raced upstairs to the big girls' room, where Selma was brushing her hair, Cookie was filing her impeccable nails, and Helga was darning a sock at the window seat. Marta was practicing plié[illegible] at the bar. I threw myself down on my cot and ripped open his letter. It said:

Dear Gilda:

This is a confession. For a long time I denied that I was Jewish. I kept it a secret but you have made me

acknowledge my heritage. Yes, I admit that I am Jewish.

"Girls, girls," I screamed, "Frank Robinson is Jewish."

"Now you can marry him," Selma said.

"Oh, Selma, that's all you ever think of. He's just a friend."

"Let me see, let me see," Cookie shouted, snatching the letter out of my hand and jumping with it from bed to bed. "It's true, he says he's Jewish. What's the other letter about?"

Letters were a big event because the girls had almost no relatives in England--or anywhere for that matter.

"This is from London," I said, carefully opening the envelope. The letter was handwritten on fine stationery:

Cricklewood
London

May 9, 1945

Dear Miss Moss:

> As you no doubt know by now, we forwarded your letter to Frank Robinson in America.
>
> You sound like a very interesting young lady. My mother and I would like to invite you to tea next Sunday at four in the afternoon. Please let me know by return post if you are able to come.
>
> Yours truly,
>
> Jonathan Goldstein
> Letters Editor
> *Life Magazine*

"The editor of *Life* has invited me to tea," I shouted.

"Let's see, let's see," Cookie said, snatching the letter

out of my hand, reading it, and passing it to Selma who passed it to Helga. Marta wasn't interested. She executed an *entrechat*, leaping in the air and crossing her feet three times.

"What's an editor?" Cookie said. "Is he important?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "but I think so."

"Goldstein. That's a Jewish name," Selma said. "I bet his mother wants to look you over, to see whether you'd make him a good wife. What will you wear?"

"Oh, Selma, don't be ridiculous. He's just being kind."

"Why would the letters editor of a famous magazine invite you to tea?" Cookie sniffed. "You're just a schoolgirl."

"I'm sixteen," I said. "Besides, he says I sound interesting. That's the reason."

"Well, *I* think you're interesting, too," Helga said, from the window seat.

"You're a twerp," Cookie said to Helga.

I wrote immediately to Mr. Goldstein to say that I would be in London the next weekend and that I'd be delighted to come to tea. All the girls were as excited as I was.

I arrived home on Friday morning. The front door, as usual, stood open. Mummy and Daddy were in the kitchen drinking tea.

"Oh, I didn't know *you* were coming," Mummy said, eyes round, mouth pursed.

"I wrote to tell you I was coming," I said. "I can come

whenever I like now. After exams are finished in two weeks, I'll be home for good. I came home because I'm going to tea on Sunday with Mr. Goldstein, the Letters Editor for *Life*. Remember?"

"Er, yes. Dad and I were just going to Fleet Street. They're celebrating the peace there. D'you want to come?"

"Of course."

My parents rarely went out together. Someone always had to mind the shop, open or closed. So it was a treat to be out with both parents. It also felt strange. Except for Uncle Max's wedding, it had been over six years since we'd all been out together.

"Take the camera, Alf," Mummy shouted.

We clambered up the winding iron stairs of the red Number 6 bus. I loved riding on the top and looking down at everyone. I stared through the window at the stone faces carved into the buildings at eye level. I loved seeing again the flat carved faces of men with beards, angry mouths wide open, forever silently shouting, inches away from the bus window.

"All off for Fleet Street. Can't go any further, too many crowds in the street," shouted the bus conductor. The buses stood marooned, empty. In Fleet Street mobs of people drifted toward Piccadilly, they seemed dazed, without expression in their eyes. Perhaps they were exhausted from bombings and the tensions of the war. My parents walked slowly. They didn't seem to know where they were going either, though we all drifted toward the

West End.

We came to a small park and sat down to rest.

"Take a picture of us, Alf," Mummy said.

Daddy took a picture of us sitting side by side in the grass, mother and daughter. I glanced at Mummy. We looked alike: bobbed brown hair, slanted hazel eyes, pug noses, pierced ears, petite slim figures. But we were totally different inside. Mummy was cautious, I was adventurous. She was critical, I tried to be tolerant. She changed suddenly from laughter to fury. I rarely became angry. She spoke freely, often laughingly, about sex. I was too shy to talk about intimate behavior. For me, love and sex were both romantic and holy. And most significant of all, I had become religious while she had remained indifferent, even hostile about our Jewish heritage.

But it was the first time in many years we'd sat so close together. I felt I really had a mother again, after so long a separation. Perhaps she'd want me, now that I was older and she didn't have to take care of me.

In Piccadilly people were still singing, dancing, and drinking riotously. A dozen people had climbed up the statue of Eros. It was a pity they'd covered him up. He'd looked so darling, poised on one foot, with his cupid's bow drawn. He was still boarded up to protect him from the bombing and the hooligans who peed in the pond at his feet. The people who climbed him clung to the ropes wrapped around the boards, waving

and singing. Below, a British girl kissed American sailors. A group of Brits, arms around each others' necks, sang and danced to the old pub song, "Knees up Mother Brown."

Locked in a tight circle, they chanted the words and kicked their knees up ten times until they all tumbled onto the ground panting and giggling.

British soldiers inched through the crowds on trucks waving flags, and girls clambered on the mudguards to kiss them. It was good to see some men back from war, though many were still fighting in Asia. Uncle Max was still in Egypt organizing the demobilization.

We hadn't seen many British soldiers during the war, they'd all been at the front. The Americans had taken their place and the men-starved women welcomed them. Only the walking wounded, like Freddy, had returned ahead of the fighting British soldiers.

"Let's go to Buckingham Palace, the King's going to speak," Mum said.

"I haven't seen the King for years," I said.

Though I was still against royalty in principle, I couldn't resist the pomp, ceremony, and glamour.

Trafalgar Square was mobbed. Nelson's column was draped with flags reading, "Victory over Germany 1945."

Signs were pasted on all the walls saying, "Annus Mirabilis," and "It's all over in the West." "Hurray for VE Day, hurray for Victory in Europe."

Finally, ahead, the huge black iron gates of Buckingham Palace pierced the sky. It was strange to see iron railings again. Everywhere else, iron railings had been taken to make tanks or guns making those buildings look toothless.

As we came near to the palace, I wondered if Dad could hear the roar of the crowds. Thousands of people were jammed against the gates shoulder to shoulder. Suddenly a bigger roar went up.

"The King and Queen," thundered the crowd, waving Union Jacks wildly. "God Save the King, we want the King," they chanted. Children on parents' shoulders waved and shouted. Daddy had to hear them, surely. He grinned at me and gave me a thumbs up sign. We couldn't speak for the din.

The Royal Family came out onto the palace balcony. There was King George in naval uniform, loaded down with medals, and the Queen, her right arm raised like the King's, the gloved hand turned in slightly, thumb spread out. Churchill stood next to them with his bulldog face and flashed his famous V for Victory sign. I had to admire *him*. Princess Elizabeth, smart in her khaki ATS army uniform--I bet she didn't polish her own brass buttons--stood on the Queen's right and the young Princess Margaret on the King's left. Their faces were tired but wreathed in smiles. I hadn't seen royalty in person since King George V and Queen Mary had ridden through Bethnal Green, during the Silver Jubilee in 1936.

The huge crowd hushed to hear the King's stuttering speech.

It was a glorious day I shall never forget: The victory celebration, seeing the royal family, meant more to me now that I was with my own parents as a family again, after so many years apart.

At home Mummy made us all tea and toast. We took turns holding over the fire the foot-long two-pronged toasting fork on which we impaled a thick slab of white bread. We slathered the toast with black-market butter and jam. I was ravenous, used to regular mealtimes at the hostel. While waiting, Daddy napped on the kitchen couch. He always said, "Never eat when you're tired."

"By the way," Mummy said, "your wounded soldier Freddy was hanging around here for a week waiting for you to come home. Why did you give him your London address?"

"He actually came to the house? I gave him the address because he begged me for it. Who thought he'd show up in London? Did you speak to him? What do you know about him?" I asked cautiously. Did she know of our meetings?

"More than I want to. Why didn't you tell me you were going out with him?"

It had never occurred to me to tell Mummy anything.

"I was sorry for him. I thought he'd go away in a few days."

"He wrote you a letter. Lucky for you I opened it," Mummy said.

She'd read my letter. How dared she?

"I never saw such a sexual letter in my life. I was shocked. And then one day I noticed a man standing on the opposite corner for hours. Finally I went over to him, and said, `Are you Freddy?' He said he was and I invited him in for tea."

"You invited him to tea? I can't believe it. What did you talk about?"

"You, of course. I told him you were only sixteen and still in high school, far too young to be involved with any man, let alone a man ten years older. I said if he came round again I'd call the police."

"Oh, poor Freddy."

"Poor Freddy my eye. If you'd have seen that letter you'd have known he's a sex maniac. . . He wanted to. . ."

"Never mind, Mummy," I said. Mummy had always been candid about sex, even though I didn't understand what she told me about Daddy's lovemaking. There were times she really embarrassed me. Though she claimed to be shocked by Freddy's letter, she was only too willing to tell me the details had I allowed her to. She had thrown the letter away, effectively discarding Freddy with it .

And on Saturday she wanted to have her way as well.

"I want you to take out the pins in Mrs. Beech's hair."

"I can't, Mummy, we're forbidden to work on the Sabbath."

She shook her forefinger in my face and screamed for the umpteenth time, "You'll marry a religious man and always have a

big belly." I felt guilty about not helping Mummy on Saturday and angry with her for trying to force me to break the Sabbath. I was delighted, however, when Zada walked over on Shabbat. He observed the Sabbath too, and didn't ride. He probably came without telling Booba. I was pleased that he wanted to see me.

He kissed me affectionately but it wasn't like old times when he hugged and squeezed me and whispered, *bubbele, fleigele, zeesele*; little doll, little wing, little sweet. No one hugged me any more. The war and separation had split us apart. And their new grandchild, Aunt Regina's Jeremy, was now the favorite.

I was thinking about Frank Robinson's letter.

"Zada," I said, "do we have any relatives in America?"

"Sure," Zada said, his kind eyes crinkling, remembering. "Why, are you thinking of going there?"

"I have an American penpal. It would be wonderful to visit him and our American relatives after the war."

"*Avada*, true, I'd like to go myself, but we can't leave the shop and it costs a lot of money for two."

"But do you know where these relatives are? I know we have Hochbergs in Argentina and Sterns in New York or New Orleans, but they're such big places, and Stern is such a common Jewish name we'd never find them."

At that moment Mummy came in. She and Zada began speaking in Yiddish, much of which I didn't understand. Anyway it would be years before I could visit America.

Sunday was the big day: I was to go to tea with the Letters Editor. I ran the bath, the new luxury in our house.

As I was pulling on my brassiere and suspender belt, Mummy came into the bedroom. She looked at my pretty white summer dress which lay ready on the bed.

"Don't wear that, wear your school uniform," she said.

"I want to dress up like a young lady."

"No, you wear your uniform," she said.

"Why must I wear that rotten old uniform?" I asked."

"Don't answer back, just do as I say."

I found the house in Cricklewood. We English-born Jews jokingly called it Cricklevitch, making fun of the refugees who pronounced the "w" of Cricklewood as a "v." Many refugees, besides English Jews, lived in Cricklewood. It was slightly more elegant than Golders Green.

I rang the bell.

A tall handsome young man with curly blond hair and bright blue eyes opened the front door. He wore a tweed suit and brown suede shoes.

"Never trust a Hungarian, a Rumanian, or men in suede shoes," Mummy had once told me.

"Oh," Mr. Goldstein said, staring at me. His face fell and his mouth dropped open as he saw me in my shapeless school clothes and heavy flat shoes. I wished I could rip off the

uniform and show him my beautiful sixteen-year-old body. I wished I were wearing that white dress with the flared skirt which showed my shapely bosom and slim waist. How different I'd look.

"Come in," he said, turning his tweedy back on me.

The room inside was windowless and gloomy. The ceiling was so low I feared he would hit his head on it.

"This is my mother," he said in a monotone.

From his friendly letter I had expected a warm welcome. But from the minute he saw me in school uniform, I could sense Mr. Jonathan Goldstein had given up on me. I could tell he'd been expecting a pretty young girl but she was hidden under the uniform. My face felt hot with shame and anger.

His mother was a charming lady with a mass of auburn hair. The skin of her face and hands was very white, and her eyes were dark. She wore a black dress with a low neckline and amber beads.

"What a pleasure to meet you," she said, extending her hand like a queen. "Do come and sit down next to me." She patted the cushion on the couch. "Excuse the disarray," she gaily waved at the vast, dark empty room. "We're emigrating to America in two weeks. We thought we'd like to meet you before we leave. We are refugees from Hungary. We had to leave everything to save our lives and escape. My poor husband didn't get away." Her eyes filled with tears. "We had such a good life there. Every luxury you could want, and now look at us. Ah well, we're lucky to get away with our lives, let's be happy."

I glanced around the room. Although it was a sparkling day outside, the room was dark. The floor seemed to be tilted and I thought that at any moment everything would slide off the table and I would slide off the couch.

There was no furniture in the room save the huge round table at which we ate, the tilted couch on which we all sat, and one chair. A fat old chrome toaster sat on the chair like a cat, its wire trailing onto the floor like a tail until it plunged into the wall. I'd never seen an electric toaster before. The table was piled with thick china they were planning to pack, I supposed.

A pretty silver toast rack sat in the middle of the oak table. It gleamed in the gloom. Mrs. Goldstein kept rhythmically putting slices of white bread in the toaster from which they popped up, brown, like magic. She leaned over languidly to pluck the toast from the toaster and set it between the silver bars of the toast rack. There they leaned elegantly and negligently for thirty seconds until Mrs. Goldstein offered them to us.

Usually, when invited to tea, one was served little sandwiches and several cakes. There was nothing to eat here but toast, jam, and tea. Jonathan ate ravenously. I had traveled a long way and was by now hungry, too. Jonathan's mother presided over the chipped brown china teapot as if it were chased silver, pouring tea from it with an elegant flick of her wrist.

"Milk? Sugar?" she asked, looking deep into my eyes, as if these were crucial questions.

My eyes strayed back to the silver toast rack. I adored it. I'd never seen one before. At home we used long, tin forks held over the fire, to toast bread. I was sure this toast rack was a sign of high class, in spite of the room's shabbiness. It was one of the few belongings she'd managed to save from Hungary, I guessed, the last remnant of her former luxurious life. I resolved that when I grew up I should have a silver toast rack myself.

Jonathan sat morosely, barely saying a word. Perhaps he was embarrassed by his home or he was disappointed in me. Still, he could have made an effort to get to know me, I thought, instead of totally withdrawing. Suppose I had worn a pretty dress? How would he have been then? All boyish charm, I bet.

Maybe the whole idea had been his mother's and he didn't even want me to be there. But his eyes had lighted in the second he opened the door before he saw my hateful school uniform.

Mrs. Goldstein kept up most of the conversation. I think she saw me as a good match for her son. A respectable girl. Chained inside my uniform, my tongue felt chained as well. Where were the witty remarks I could always come up with on the trains when I rode with the Yanks? *They* always put me at ease.

"You must come and visit us if you come to America."

She spoke as if I were due to hop over next week.

"I'd love to," I said.

She gave me a white parchment card with her name and an American address printed on it in an elegant script.

"Thank you," I said.

As the tea tediously wore on, Jonathan Goldstein seemed almost to fade away into the wallpaper like Whistler's mother. My mouth ached from smiling. I wanted desperately to go home. When I finally could get away, all he could manage was a faint wave goodbye.

"*Why* did you make me wear that stupid school uniform?" I raged at Mummy when I returned home. I'd never before questioned her judgment, but I was furious.

"I thought he'd be a fat old man and would think you looked like a darling in it," she protested.

"He was young and handsome. He wanted to see an elegant young woman and I looked like a stupid shapeless schoolgirl. I *begged* you not to make me wear that uniform. The whole afternoon was ruined."

I waited for Mummy to smack me for talking back but she didn't. It was the first time I'd made a brave stand for independence and not been punished.

"Well cheer up, the news is good. We've encircled Berlin and caught that anti-Semite, Pétain," Mummy said.

"Fat lot of good that does me," I said, feeling like Freddy

with his "What good does peace do me?" speech.

"Tea was a total disaster," I muttered. "I'll never see him again."

I promised myself that in future I'd use my own judgment, not Mummy's. When I came home for good, I'd make my own decisions. Mummy would have to stop bossing me as if I were a child. And I would go to America, I determined. I would meet Frank Robinson and Mrs. Goldstein and Jonathan. We'd have tea, with their silver toast rack and a perfect china teapot. I'd dress like the grown-up I was, and Jonathan Goldstein and Frank Robinson would find me fascinating.

In five years, finished with school and college, I'd be twenty-one, no longer in need of my parents' consent to leave home. I'd be free to do exactly as I wanted. I'd be independent.

All I needed was the one-way fare to America.

30.

Final Exams with a Pitchfork

On Sunday evening I returned to Bishops Stortford to the Schenkers for the final exams. But with the war in Europe over, the Schenkers were packing to return to their London house, leaving the very next day. Until exams were finished, I'd have to go to yet another foster home.

"Because it's our last meal together, I've made you a special treat," Mrs. Schenker said.

"Oh, that looks delicious."

She'd made a fresh salad of crisp green lettuce, tomato and cucumber. There were enormous fresh strawberries pitted with seeds, and luscious ice cream, which I hadn't tasted for nearly six years.

"What a delectable feast and just for me. This is wonderful," I said, happily spooning up the rare treats. "You're so good to me."

Mrs. Schenker turned slightly pink. I wondered if she had any children. She had never mentioned any.

"Why don't you leave me your London address and perhaps you can come and visit me sometimes when you get back," she said.

"I'd be delighted."

I was sure she'd forget me once she got back to London. She probably lived in a posh neighborhood like Golders Green or Crickelwood or in a posh house in the West End. I bet she even

had a silver toast rack. Once she got home she wouldn't mix with a poor East London girl.

After tea I helped Mrs. Schenker pack. She showed me how to wrap her beautiful cocktail and brandy glasses in paper so they wouldn't break.

"I didn't even know there were different shaped glasses for different drinks," I said.

I wanted to ask Mrs. Schenker about her face creams and her lovely skin but didn't have the cheek. At about nine p.m. I said goodbye, giving her a light kiss on the cheek, which made her blush again, and went over to Mrs. Birch. I'd be billeted with the Birches, weekdays, for the remaining weeks before the exams.

Mrs. Birch was a reserved, no-nonsense, neat, gentile lady with short dirty-blonde bobbed hair, a lean face, and cool gray eyes. She greeted me with a nod. Unlike my previous Christian foster mothers, she spoke clipped English with an educated inflection and used three-syllable words. Her husband was thin with fair but sparse hair, and he wore a hand-knitted V-necked sleeveless Fair-Isle sweater. He looked like an officer in civvies. He never spoke to me the entire time I was there. They both stood and sat very straight. Neither of them ever smiled.

Mrs. Birch served breakfast in the dining room, not in the kitchen as my past foster parents had done. At breakfast the Birches read *The Times* and listened silently to the BBC.

Elections were coming up soon. The Conservatives led by Churchill and Labor led by Attlee were battling for power. Whenever Attlee's name was mentioned, I thought the Birches turned down their mouths.

My first morning with them we ate a breakfast of sardines on toast, a great luxury. Tinned food was hard to get, since all metal had gone to the war effort.

"Who're you going to vote for?" I asked Mrs. Birch.

"Who do you think?" she retorted with such asperity I didn't dare ask. I felt sure she'd vote Conservative. Mr. Birch merely glanced at me over his newspaper, with mocking eyes. I didn't care if he didn't speak to me. I'd only be there for two weeks. Everywhere I'd ever stayed, even home, was temporary.

I wrote in my diary:

> Thursday 14 - Sun. 17th S W O T T I N G
> Monday 25 June, 1945, Matriculation exams began. Smashing spiffing history paper. Hope for Distinction.
>
> Monday July 2, 1945. Did Latin exam today. I knew my Tacitus *Agricola* back to front. Shall be surprised if I pass in Language but hope to see credit in Literature part.

I was well-drilled in Horace, thanks to Irish Miss Brady with her flaming red hair and her knuckle-rapping ruler.

After exams Doreen and I went to Lamb's Tea Shop.

"How did you do?" I asked.

"Oh, terrible," she groaned. "I think I flunked history."

"Me, too," I lied.

Doreen leaned over the table, straight blonde hair falling in her face. I wished I had hair like hers.

"Guess what," she said.

"What?" I knew what she was going to say.

"I'm engaged." She triumphantly held out her right hand. A small diamond ring sparkled on her finger."

"Oh, Doreen," I'm so happy for you."

We celebrated with the first cream buns of peacetime, biting with delirious joy into the goo.

The following morning I went to the tool shed to get my bicycle. I grasped the bike handle, which dislodged a pitchfork hanging over my bike. The pitchfork dropped off a nail straight down like a plumb line, fell an inch into my leg and stuck there.

"Help," I screamed. "I'm stabbed."

Mrs. Birch came running and pulled the pitchfork out. I screamed again.

"Now *how* did you manage to knock that down?" Mrs. Birch said, half laughing half reproving.

She hung the pitchfork back on the nail and calmly walked back inside the house. The pitchfork had left a deep gory hole in my leg with brown earth around it. I was worried about it becoming infected but couldn't stop to clean it. Leg throbbing, I cycled off madly to my exam, afraid of being late.

Twelve girls sat in the large hall, its floor so polished we could see ourselves in it. Our pen nibs and inkwells were cleaned and ready.

We all nervously fiddled, twitched and scratched.

Miss Atzomer was proctor. She sat at a desk in front of us with her long horse face and frizzy black hair. I raised my hand to speak. She nodded.

"Miss Atzomer, a pitchfork just fell into my leg and it hurts. May I keep my leg up during the exam?" I asked.

"Certainly not," she snapped.

Bloody bitch, I thought. Horse face. My leg really ached.

Doreen leaned over and whispered, "I'll take you to Dr. Wallace right after the exam."

"Anyone speaking during the exam will automatically be failed," Miss Atzomer said severely.

Doreen and I quickly looked down at our desks.

During the exam my leg ached and throbbed. I was terrified I'd get lockjaw, imagining my jaws clamped shut forever.

Three hours later I hobbled up to Atzomer's desk, exaggerating my limp to make her feel guilty. I stared at her as I handed in my exam. If I got lockjaw or gangrene, I thought, it would be her fault. She snatched the paper without looking at me.

Doreen sat me on her bike and pushed me all the way to her doctor. It had been several years since I'd been to one. The

doctor had looked at my bare breasts and said, "breathe in deeply." When I did he snarled at his nurse, "She looks like a frog." I was mortally embarrassed.

Doreen's doctor was different. Dr. Wallace, a bear-like man with glasses and unruly brown hair, peered at me with kind brown eyes.

"I'm on my way to a Conservative meeting but I'm a little early so I'll take a look at it," he said.

I let him look at my leg even if he *was* a Conservative. His office was full of skulls, Indian statues, oriental rugs, and stringed musical instruments. Dusty surgical instruments lay scattered all about on grayish towels. Only his hypodermic needle glittered clean. He gave me a tetanus injection.

Except for his dusty office he radiated medical authority and kindness. I instantly adored him.

"If you absolutely *have* to go back to school tomorrow, keep your leg up. If you put it down, the blood might run into your ankles and turn septic. I'll come and see you in the evening."

"But I'm going home to London right after the last exam, tomorrow," I wailed.

"You can't go," he said.

Doreen walked me on her bike, with me on the seat, all the way to the Birches. "Don't worry, you'll soon be better," she said.

"Thanks for being such a good friend," I said.

I limped inside and phoned Mummy. This was the first foster home I'd stayed in that had a telephone. They were easier to get after the war had ended. The Birches allowed me to call even though it was long-distance. I told Mummy about the pitchfork.

"Stay there and rest," she said.

"I must get home for Friday. I have a date with my friend Peggy that afternoon."

"Don't come home," Mummy said.

Doreen wheeled me all the way home.

In the morning Miss Scott, my English teacher, picked me up in her little car and drove me to school. Dr. Wallace must have given Miss Atzomer instructions that I wasn't to walk or I'd made her feel guilty with my pathetic limping. This time I was allowed to do my last exam with my leg up. It still throbbed painfully where the pitchfork had fallen in. I was in pain and couldn't concentrate on this exam as I'd done on the earlier ones.

The next day, Thursday, Dr. Wallace came to see me late at eleven o'clock at night.

"It was swell of you to come so late," I said.

"You speak like an American," Mrs. Birch said, sniffing.

"Take care to keep your leg up tomorrow," Dr. Wallace said.

"Thank you so much," I said, and silently blessed him.

On Friday I finally finished the last exam. After two years

of gruelling work I finished the exams feeling I'd done well--except for the day of the pitchfork accident. Two days later, my leg feeling much better, Doreen and I went out to celebrate at Lamb's, stuffing our faces with well-earned scones and butter and cream buns.

With war in Europe and exams over, the last days of school were giddy ones.

We girls enjoyed one particular end-of-the-year custom. Each girl owned a nicely bound small autograph book with blank pages in which friends could write anything they wished. Mine was covered with blue velvet. After returning to London it was doubtful I'd ever see these country girls again.

"Promise you'll write," Doreen said.

"Of course, and you promise to write to me."

"I promise."

Doreen wrote in my autograph book:

Gilda is a little girl
Single is her station
Happy be the little man
That makes the alteration

I wrote in her book a ditty Mummy had taught me.

A hundred years ago today
In the wilderness so drear
The man with powder in his gun
Went out to hunt the deer
But now the times are somewhat changed
And on a different plan
The deer with powder on her nose
Goes out to hunt the man.

Elsie Banks wrote in my book:

Patience is a virtue
Have it if you can
It's seldom in a woman
And never in a man.

I wrote in Elsie's book:

The wind, the wind, the naughty wind
It blows the short skirts high
But God is just, he sends the dust
To close the wicked man's eye.

Maisie Farrell wrote in my book:

Oh please do not kiss me
Oh please do not kiss
Oh please do not
Oh please do
Oh please
Oh.

Phyllis wrote in my book:

There is so much good in the worst of us
and so much bad in the best of us
That it ill behooves any of us
To find fault with the rest of us.

We were all called to assembly for final announcements and prizes. Because the prayers and hymns were Christian, Cookie and I didn't sit with the rest of the school at assembly. Instead we sat on a balcony directly over the stage, enclosed by frosted glass over the stage, like Indian women in *purdah*. We could hear all the announcements, but we could see nothing.

"And the winner of the Senior Ferguson Literary prize is. . ." and I heard my name again, as I'd heard it the year before

for the Junior Ferguson prize. My "baked" entry, sent in while I was in quarantine, had won. I was shocked, since I thought Nurse had sent it in too late. All four hundred girls clapped enthusiastically. I felt just as pleased that they had accepted me in spite of Miss Blood's denunciation of Jews, as I did about receiving the literary prize again.

When my name was called out, I ran along the upstairs stone hallway, down an entire flight of slithery stone steps, down to the ground floor stone hall to the auditorium door. There I skidded to a halt, took a deep breath, entered the auditorium sedately, and walked up the podium steps in front of four hundred attentive girls. The headmistress handed me my prize, Axel Munthe's book, to which I'd added a first chapter, and shook my hand. The book was inscribed in the front with `Senior Winner of the Dr. Ferguson Literary Prize.' I smiled happily. I had not expected such a prize.

Chapter 31

Hostel Goodbyes

As soon as I walked into the hostel, Selma rushed me up the stairs to the big girls' bedroom.

"Guess what," she said breathlessly.

"What?" As with Doreen, I already knew what she was going to tell me.

"I'm engaged. But it's a secret."

"Oh, Selma," I cried, hugging her, tears running down my cheeks.

First Doreen and now Selma. "But you're only fifteen."

"That's why it's a secret. You mustn't tell *anyone*. You're the only one who knows. We're going to get married in two years. I'll be seventeen and he'll be twenty. As soon as we can we're going to live in America. Franz has a brother and cousins there. Just think, in two years I'll have my own husband, my own home, my own family, and later my own children. No more hostels and living in other peoples' houses. I'm so happy I could burst."

We sat on the window seat in the big girls' room, hugged each other, cried, and swore to be friends all our lives.

I was grateful to be back in the hostel, in the arms of my dearest friend where I was accepted, loved, and cared for. If only I could stay all my life. On the other hand, I was excited about going back to London and home. As long as the hostel was there, I knew I could come back and visit. But how long would it

be there?

With the end of war the world was changing fast. The men would be coming home, evacuees would return to London. My time at the hostel was drawing to a close. I had parents to go home to. But I felt a little like Freddy. What good would peace do me? Underneath all the excitement, I felt wounded and apprehensive about leaving the hostel and going home to live with Mummy. I'd been someone special at the hostel, head girl, and I'd made many friends. That would all change when I left.

I went upstairs to pack. I had only a few clothes. The big girls came with me. After I packed my school uniform, two dresses, a few sweaters and skirts, my indoor school shoes and my autograph book, there was nothing left to do but say goodbye.

I hated goodbyes. Throughout my life I'd said goodbye to Mummy, and she to me, so often. To me, the word goodbye meant, "good riddance to bad rubbish," or, "I don't want you, I'm glad you're going away."

But now it was I who was saying goodbye, and to girls I loved like the sisters I never had. I loved the four hundred year old White House. I loved its honeycomb of rooms, its wide, gracious staircase, the wardens' warm panelled study, our cozy big girls' room at the top of the house, the sunny window seat where we'd had so many intimate talks, and our view from the wide bay window, of the great, beautiful garden. I could only think that I'd be able to come back and visit often, as long as there

was someone to visit.

Selma hugged me goodbye. I smelled the lavender that she kept in her clothes. Her long hair brushed my face.

"Goodbye, Selma, write to me."

"I will. And I'll be coming to London to finish school at Skinner's. I'll be going to the Cazenove Road hostel."

"Such a funny name for a school, Skinner's," I said.

"It's a very good school, founded in the Middle Ages by the Skinner's Guild."

"I'll see you in London. Here's my telephone number," and I scribbled it down, happy that we'd soon meet again.

Cookie came forward, as angular as ever but calmer since she'd met Alex. She shook my hand. "Cheerio old girl, I'll also be coming to London for a short time before I join my mother in South America."

Helga ran into my arms, sobbing, "I hate to see you leave."

"I hate to leave you, too, Mouse," I said, stroking her frizzy hair. "How about you, are you coming to London?"

"Only for a short time, on my way to join my parents in Holland," Helga sniffed. "They've been released from concentration camp but they're both ill from the treatment there. I won't be able to finish school. I have to go to work and look after them."

"You must all come to tea at my house," I said.

To Marta I said, "Now you can finish your training to be a

ballerina."

"I *am* a ballerina," she said, pirouetting and curtseying.

Goodbyes to Anita came with a short hug and a few tears. I knew I'd see *her* again. She lived in London in the East End.

I ran downstairs to say goodbye to the Wardens, Mr. and Mrs. Wreschner. The big girls came with me. I knocked on the door of the study and we all entered. The Wreschners, Nurse, and Mrs. Bramson were having tea.

The Wreschners had replaced the Kohlers some weeks before. They were both German refugees in their thirties, much younger and more modern than the Kohlers. They were friendly but firm, though I had little chance to get to know them well. I had been away during the last several weeks before the final exams.

"You're leaving?" Margo Wreschner said. She was big with child. "Come back whenever you like. You're always welcome. And good luck. We'll be here until the hostel closes."

"Yes, you're welcome to come whenever you like," Boaz Wreschner said.

Nurse and Mrs. Bramson each gave me a hug and a kiss.

"Where are you all going after the hostel closes?" I asked.

"We'll be here for at least a year. But as soon as the government closes the hostel, we're emigrating to Israel," Mrs. Wreschner said. "If the British allow us in.

"We want our children to grow up in our own country," Mr. Wreschner said.

"What happens to all the children here? I asked.

"The older children can go to the London hostel in Cazenove Road. We have to find a distant relative or lacking that, a foster-parent, for the small children to go to," Mrs. Wreschner said.

"After these children are settled, the hostel is going to be turned into a rehabilitation center for teenage girls coming out of concentration camp. We're to help them adjust to normal life," Nurse said.

"I'm glad you'll be here for at least a year. I need to come back and see you," I said. "Goodbye," the word was wrenched out of my mouth.

I turned to Selma, Cookie and Helga.

"I have an idea: Since you're all coming to London, let's meet in the Trocadero restaurant four weeks from today at four p.m.," I said. "We always said we'd meet in a posh restaurant after the war, and we will. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Selma, Helga and Cookie.

Selma, Helga and Cookie hugged and kissed me again.

"I'll see you three in London four weeks from today. Don't forget."

Marta, Anita and Paula didn't object. They knew that we four were special friends, having travelled to high school together for two years.

I finally managed to reach the front door through which I'd entered so fearfully two years before. All the little kids had gathered and were touching me, pulling at my clothes and kissing me goodbye. I couldn't delay leaving any longer. I had to catch the train. "Goodbye everybody," I said. "Shalom."

"Shalom," they chorused.

"Can Cookie, Helga and I walk her to the station?" Selma asked the Wreschners. The Wreschners smiled and nodded.

Paula and Marta, the Wreschners and the little children stood at the door waving goodbye. "Good luck," they called. "Come and see us soon."

"I will," I said, then Selma took the valise from my hand.

Tears rose to my eyes as the red door closed behind me.

PART 111

PEACETIME WITH MUMMY

Chapter 32

Home After the War

I was very quiet and thoughtful on the train as it rumbled back to London. Gone were the cheerful Americans. Gone were Selma, Helga, and Cookie. I already felt lonely.

As we rode, the scenery outside gradually changed from green countryside to pocket-size suburban gardens to city parks, then to tall buildings. The scenery, as I had, changed from quiet and naive to vocal and somewhat urbane during the six years of the war. I had journeyed in more ways than one.

What would peacetime be like? Except for a few visits to London, I'd been away from home since the age of nine. What would it be like living in London as a grown up girl of sixteen, I wondered, staring at my reflection in the window?

The train arrived at sooty, noisy Liverpool Street Station. Although I missed the hostel, I was cheered by crowded, rambunctious London again. Many gaunt buildings stood black, charred, and windowless, reminders of the blitz. Workers were still clearing rubble from the streets. Finally I arrived at our new place.

A short while ago my parents had moved to a bigger house and shop further down the street. As I entered the shop, the sweet

scent of shaving lotion, which Daddy slapped on the men's faces and the acrid smell of ammonia, which Mummy used for perms, reminded me that home was a mixed blessing.

"Ah, so you're home," Mummy said, as the shop door bell jangled. She was setting Mrs. Lyons' hair. Mrs. Lyons was beautiful but poor, with eight young daughters. In return for Mummy setting her hair, she scrubbed our floors. Mummy tucked Mrs. Lyons under the dryer and turned to her 'perm,' Mrs. Hutchinson. Dad gave me a bristly kiss and returned to his customer.

I kissed Mummy's cheek. Mummy rolled Mrs. Hutchinson's last curl and attached each curler to the Medusa black wires of the permanent wave machine. She turned on the switch for the electric current to run through the curlers. As always I was terrified Mummy would electrocute the customer. I imagined the woman screaming, hair, arms, fingers, legs and toes stretched out, her burned curls dropping onto the floor.

I went upstairs to unpack. A nice surprise awaited me. For the first time, I had my own room. With government payments for war damage, Mummy had divided a large room upstairs into two: a new bathroom (without a toilet) for everyone and a bedroom for me. I no longer had to sleep on the hard sofa in the dining room nor on the kitchen bed. Mummy had decorated the bedroom with frilly white curtains and put a new lamp and table next to the bed. There was even a small wardrobe behind the door. There

was no desk but a gas fire and a gramophone with a pile of records made my new room cozy.

I unpacked, came down and thanked Mummy. She just smiled.

The next weekend the results of my Matriculation arrived on a postcard. "Whoopee," I yelled. "Look Mum, I passed seven out of the eight subjects." The one exam I failed was taken the day the pitchfork fell in my leg. "I passed Matriculation. Now I can go to Spitalfields in September."

"When do you begin work?" Mummy answered.

The next day Mummy found a job for me in the "Want" ads. The French Embassy needed someone who spoke fluent French. I was interviewed and accepted. The following week I began work by helping French sailors send cigarettes to French troops still stationed abroad. Although the war was over, it took months to demobilize everyone and send them home.

I flirted with the sailors in their darling striped dickeys and berets with pom-poms. When I left for the day, they always leaned out of the embassy windows, framed like Renoir portraits, and blew me kisses.

"Méchant," wicked fellow, I said to Louis, hanging out of the Embassy window.

"I'm only taking the air," he said innocently, in French.

At the Embassy I met my first Jewish Frenchman, Jean-Louis Cohen. He took me dancing at the Palais, a gigantic ballroom

where all the famous bands played: Ted Heath, Jack Hylton, Reginald Forsythe and George Melachrino, among others. Hundreds of couples circled the floor dancing to songs like, "I'm going to get lit up when the lights go up in London," and "When they Sound the Last All-Clear." Jean-Louis held me closer than any man had dared. Well, he was French. I felt his whole body against mine. I felt very experienced.

"Are you a virgin?" he asked.

When I said "yes," he patted me on the cheek, put me on the bus, and never called again.

The next Friday after work I met my friend Peggy at the monument outside Charing Cross Station. It was a lovely summer day. Peggy and I had met one night at the Palais, where Jean-Louis had taken me. On that night no one asked either of us to dance, so we stood against the walls, chatted, and became friends.

Now we walked through the crowds in Marble Arch until we reached Lyons Corner House, a genteel but inexpensive restaurant. A small orchestra of middle-aged ladies dressed in lace played classical music. A shapely young woman with a very short skirt and a tray hanging by a band round her neck walked round the restaurant calling out, "Cigarettes, Players Please."

After tea Peggy and I strolled to Hyde Park, where we heard the voices of many speakers even before we saw them. This was

the London that I loved. We stopped and gazed up at the first speaker, a well-dressed man standing on his wooden box.

"We should re-elect our hero Churchill, he brought us through the war," he shouted.

"Hear, hear," some sleek men and women shouted back.

"Boo," shouted two men in caps. "Get orf yer soap box."

Peggy and I moved to another fellow, young, wearing a shabby suit and a grey cap.

". . . and if we should get another Conservative Prime Minister, we'll be in exactly the same position as we were before the war: depression, low wages, and illness. We need a Labor government that will give everybody, not just the rich, a fair wage, employment, unemployment insurance, and health care."

"Hear, hear."

"Just who do you think is going to pay for all this?" yelled a man in pinstripe trousers and a bowler hat.

"We all are, out of taxes, and you toffs are going to pay more taxes than you been paying so far. We're going to get unemployment, not just the dole to make us feel ashamed if we don't have work. And we're going to nationalize coal and railways so they can't send our boys down in dangerous mines to make money for your bloody capitalists."

"Hear, hear," some men and women in the crowd shouted.

The man in the bowler stamped off angrily, swinging his umbrella round and round by the handle. Peggy and I moved on.

"How come a few people are very rich while others work hard and still don't make enough to live on? It's capitalist exploitation," another man argued. "`To each according to his needs, from each according to his ability,'" he shouted.

Some people clapped and cheered, others booed him.

An Indian stood on a box arguing for Indian independence, the cadence of his voice like that of a Welshman. I'd read in the news that besides Israel, Egypt and Northern Ireland also wanted independence from the British.

We passed the usual evangelical preacher, dark hair plastered down over his forehead, his eyes wide and intense. A placard propped against his soap box proclaimed "THE END IS NEAR."

"I think we're just at the beginning," I said to Peggy. "With peace, everything seems new and rosy."

As a plane flew overhead, a tiny boy of about four flung himself face down on the ground and screamed, "German bombers."

"It's all right, darling," his mother said, picking the boy up and hugging him. "The war's over, it's one of ours."

"When I'm twenty-one, I'll vote Labor," I said to Peggy.

"Not me. I'm Conservative," Peggy said, "So's my Dad."

"The Conservatives take from the poor and give to the rich."

"That suits me," Peggy said and laughed.

It seemed to me unjust that some didn't work at all and were rich and others worked hard all their lives but were starving.

I thought of the unemployed men outside the tailors' union, the men on the soup lines, capped heads bent in shame, begging for food. I recalled the poverty of my father's parents before the war. If Daddy's parents had had the money to take him to a doctor to treat his ear infection, he might not have become deaf. I'd have had a father I could talk to.

Peggy and I left the speakers and strolled toward a sports field where a group of men were wearing what appeared to be striped pajamas. A young man held a bat behind his shoulder, staring straight ahead. He faced the crouched pitcher who seemed to unwind like a clock spring. All his limbs flew outward as he swung his arm back, leg up, and whizzed the ball to the batman.

"Look, the Yanks are playing baseball," I said to Peggy. "They're not in uniform any more. I'll really miss the Yanks when they go back to America. Just when we're getting old enough to go out with them, they have to leave," I lamented.

"C'mon, Whitey boy, give 'em a mama!" one of the Yanks yelled. I grinned. My teachers complained I used too much American slang. A stab of pain went through my leg.

"Let's go home, my leg's beginning to hurt."

We separated, Peggy to take the tube to Shepherd's Bush, and I to take the Number 6 bus East to Shoreditch.

"T.T.F.N.," Peggy shouted as her head disappeared down the steps into the tube.

"Ta ta for now," I called out, laughing.

Chapter 33

Testing my Resolve

The summer passed quickly and I began school at Spitalfields. As I passed the wholesale vegetable market on the way to school, I enjoyed the familiar sight of men walking gracefully through the covered market with three or more round baskets of vegetables on their heads. They reminded me of the baker in Pharoah's dream, who also carried baskets of food on his head.

School was held in an ancient three story brick building built in medieval times. School work was hard but pleasant. Miss Roberts, the English teacher who could yawn with her mouth shut, had come back from Ely as did many others with her. Miss Brady with her flaming red hair, still rapped us over the knuckles with her ruler if we made a mistake in Latin. Miss Lawson, our history teacher, was the first engaged high school teacher we'd ever had. High school teachers had to be unmarried until after the war.

We were preparing for the next examination to be taken at age eighteen, Higher School Certificate. There were only six girls in the class, so our course work was both intimate and intensive. We each specialized in four subjects. I took English, French, History and Latin. Passing Latin with a Distinction was a prerequisite in order to read for a B.A. at London University.

Except for Mondays, prayers for Christian and Jewish girls

were held separately. I was put in charge of the Jewish girls' prayers. The school was about two-thirds Jewish, the East End being the main Jewish area. Miss Pierce, our Nordic looking headmistress, came in to the Jewish girls' prayer meeting every morning, stood at the door and greeted us with, "Shalom Aleichem," peace to you. It was strange to hear Hebrew coming out of such an Icelandic looking lady. She never discriminated between Christian and Jewish girls.

After Miss Pierce greeted us, made the announcements and left, I stood on the platform and led the girls in a Hebrew hymn or prayer. Sometimes Miss Galinsky, one of our two Jewish teachers, accompanied us on the piano.

One of the girls in our class, Shulamit Jakobovits, was the youngest daughter of Rabbi Jakobovits, chief of the Bet Din, the Jewish Court. At the Bet Din, housed in the East End, Jews called upon a judge to make decisions based on the laws of the Torah, especially about marriage, divorce and inheritance--and sometimes to settle a business dispute. One of Shulamit's brothers, Emmanuel, later became Chief Rabbi of Ireland and then of England and was knighted.

As I was the only other religious girl in our class, Shulamit and I became friends. One Saturday she invited me for lunch.

"Good Shabbos, come in," she greeted me at the door.

She was a tall, slender girl, with beautiful, enormous dark

eyes and luxuriant black hair. But she looked drawn and tired. As the only remaining girl in her house--her older sister Lottie was married--she put in long hours helping her mother take care of her father, five brothers and many guests. Her father, dignified with his white spade beard, and his reserved but kind wife, greeted me warmly, taking both my hands in hers. Her five skinny brothers said, "Good shabbos."

We all washed our hands ritually, the rabbi made *kiddush*, the blessing over wine and then bread, and Shulamit and her mother served the food. The table talk was animated among the brothers and guests: Some were arguing that Torah and science were not in conflict because the sequence of Darwin's evolution paralleled that of Creation and that God's "day" could have been millions of years. Mr. Shapiro had taught us that a meal without talk of Torah was like a meal of dust.

The Jakobovits family was so large that, together with their guests, I almost felt as if I were in the hostel again. I left their house feeling full of spiritual pleasure. I had enjoyed this Sabbath as it was supposed to be enjoyed, like a bride with her groom. The bride symbolized the Jews, the groom, God.

When I returned home that day Mummy said, "I want you to go to the wholesalers for cigarettes, we're short. You can walk there."

I had to explain once more to Mummy that I couldn't work on

Shabbat. "Besides," I argued, "the Levys are Jewish."

"That's the very reason I want you to go. The Levy son is rich. He might take a fancy to you. All cats are gray in the dark, so you may as well marry a rich one."

As a matter of fact I'd always liked the Levy son. He was skinny but wiry, like Daddy. He had dark curly hair, slanting intelligent eyes, and a pointed chin like a fox. He was at least ten years my senior and his entire thin face was pockmarked. It made him look slightly sinister and worldly, which attracted me. Despite this, I told Mummy I could not walk to the Levys and conduct business on Shabbat.

"You and your stupid Sabbath," Mummy screamed at me, shaking a finger in my face. "You're wasting your education. You'll marry a poor man and always have a big belly." It wasn't the first time she'd said it. It wasn't the first time I wanted to bite that finger.

The next Friday evening Mummy, as usual, lit the Sabbath candles, covered her face with her hands and said the blessing over the candles. This signified that the Sabbath had begun and that all work and business ceased until nightfall, Saturday evening.

Mummy followed this ritual by saying, "I want you to help out in the shop tomorrow. You can sell the customers cigarettes or condoms or jewelry, and take the pins out from the women's hair."

I repeated my usual objection to working on the Sabbath and said I'd be glad to work any other day.

"I need help on *Saturday*," she screamed, her face flushed beet red. She left the kitchen and went into the adjoining shop.

Daddy took me aside. "Don't get her excited, you don't know what she's like when she gets upset," he warned me. And then he whispered, "Don't tell her what I said."

I didn't understand why Daddy was so afraid of Mummy. He had been a lightweight boxer before he married, and I'd seen him take on men much bigger than him during my childhood. He was spunky and didn't seem to be afraid of anyone.

Except Mummy.

"If it was up to me I'd close on Saturday," he said quietly, "and open on Sunday like they do in the Jewish East End. Your mother won't hear of it but don't tell her I said so or I'll be in terrible trouble."

"You're in terrible trouble now," Mummy said, storming into the kitchen. "You think I'm deaf, like you? I heard every word."

She picked up a heavy plate and raised her hand to throw it at Daddy. To my astonishment he pulled me in front of him. Mummy hesitated a second then threw the plate. It hit me hard on my chest.

I couldn't believe that Mummy threw the plate, even when she saw Daddy pull me in front of him. Nor could I believe that Daddy had used me as a shield. I ran to my room, crying. My

chest hurt. A large black and blue bruise was emerging like a flower. At that moment I didn't know who I hated more. I despised Daddy for being such a coward and was shocked at Mummy deliberately throwing a plate at me. Me, her only child.

To avoid confrontations I went to friends for Shabbat and for Jewish holidays whenever possible. Mummy didn't object to this, as it got me out of her way and she approved of my friends who were all socially of a higher class than us. Mummy was eager for me to associate with educated and well-to-do people. She overlooked their being religious if they were educated and 'comfortable.'

At Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. I was invited to stay with friends in Gateshead, a world-famous *yeshiva*, or rabbinical seminary town. My friends, Ruth Wagshall and her husband, were a young, newly married couple. The night before the wedding, the Jewish community had come into the empty house (no one locked doors then), put new sheets on the bed, new dishes and cutlery in the kitchen, one set for meat, another set for dairy meals, spread a new white tablecloth on the table, and left them food for a week. They also left a pair of candlesticks with candles on the table, ready to light for the festival. After the wedding, different families in the community arranged *sheva brachot*, seven feasts and blessings for the bride and groom. These were gay and happy occasions in which I felt at home with the community.

But Jewish law said to honor your mother and father, so

despite their disregard for Jewish customs, I returned home to spend Yom Kippur with my parents. My mother came from a religious home and had a good Jewish education but was now almost totally secular. My father had no Jewish education at all; he believed in a sort of God, but practiced nothing. Unlike Mummy, however, he didn't mock and criticize me for being observant. He was almost bohemian and more tolerant of people's differences.

My parents closed the shop for Yom Kippur, but did not fast or go to synagogue. Inside the dark house, lights off so people would think they were in shul, observing Yom Kippur, life was the same as any weekday. My parents cooked, ate, and cleaned.

Like most Jews, on this holiest day of the year, I began to fast in the evening. I went to Kol Nidre services at the closest synagogue to ask God to forgive my sins of the year.

Until I came back to London, I had never been inside a synagogue. At the hostel we held our own services inside the house. I missed the closeness of the girls. I only knew one girl in this synagogue, Sarah Lampel, who also attended Spitalfields. She was older than me, seventeen, and in the class above mine. She came from an important Chassidic family. Its long line of illustrious scholars and deeply pious men were highly respected among religious people. Like Shulamit, Sarah would finish school at eighteen and likely marry some prestigious scholar, one perhaps chosen by her parents.

I felt Sarah regarded me as someone who'd only lately become

religious, not from birth like herself. She often looked at me quizzically, as if to say, "Are you sincere?"

I wanted to impress Sarah with my sincerity, to show her that I was committed. At the end of the evening service we said to each other, *"gmar tov,"* you should have a good end, that God should forgive you your sins for this year, and "Good *yomtov*," a good holyday to you. I went home feeling good and pure.

The next day I went to shul in the morning. At two in the afternoon I came home to rest until prayers resumed at four.

Mummy said to me, "I want to dye your hair red."

"Mummy," I gasped, "it's Yom Kippur. We don't even wash our hands and faces today, let alone dye our hair."

"I want to dye your hair," she insisted. "It'll only take a couple of hours, then you can go back to your stupid synagogue."

"*Please* don't dye my hair today, Mummy, it's Yom Kippur."

In response Mummy grabbed me by the hair, dumped me in the chair, and slathered red dye onto my hair.

"Don't do it," I pleaded, "stop," but she took no notice.

I wanted to fight Mummy but the Torah said it was a great sin for a child to lift a hand against a parent. So how could I raise a hand, even in self-defense, to my mother? I wasn't breaking the law myself, *she* was breaking it. God would understand that. But would Sarah?

Her hands stained red like blood, Mummy then put me under the dryer. Tears ran down my face. Mummy sat calmly in front of

the fire and sipped her tea.

It was time to go back to synagogue for the ending Yom Kippur prayers. Soon it would be dark, and the *shofar*, the ram's horn, would be blown, signalling the end of Yom Kippur, of fasting and prayers for forgiveness. Before going back to synagogue, I tied a scarf over my hair. But it kept slipping backward, exposing the red hair in front.

The first person I met outside the synagogue was Sarah. She looked at me with scorn. I blushed crimson with shame. I couldn't explain to her why I had come back to synagogue on Yom Kippur with red hair. Except to politely say hello, Sarah never spoke to me again. The girls in school stared. The teachers' mouths tightened when they saw my dyed hair. I only told Shulamit, shame-faced, what had happened.

"You couldn't help it," she said. "It wasn't your fault."

I was grateful for her understanding.

After the war our first telephone was installed. I called Mr. Shapiro for advice. He had become headmaster of a Jewish High School in London. I called from the extension in Mummy's bedroom and we spoke in Hebrew in case Mummy overheard. I told Mr. Shapiro that Mummy wanted me to work in the shop on Shabbat.

"I feel so guilty not helping my mother when she's working on Shabbat," I said, "And she's so angry with me."

"You're obligated to obey your parents so long as they don't

try to make you break Jewish law. But regarding Shabbat, it's more important to obey God. In all other things you should obey your parents," Mr. Shapiro said.

As soon as I hung up Mummy ran into her bedroom. "Why are you asking a perfect stranger about our private life?" she screamed.

"He's not a perfect stranger, he was the guardian at the hostel for years. He's a close friend."

"You shouldn't talk about me to others."

She must have listened to our conversation on the extension. Though she hadn't studied Hebrew for at least twenty years, she had understood everything we said. She didn't understand *me*, though. She didn't even try.

That night Mummy entered my bedroom with a black jar of Bovril, a beef-based nostrum which advertised that it made you strong. I was doing my Latin homework, Tacitus' *Agricola* in bed. Mummy sat on the edge of it, and held out a spoon filled with the dark brown liquid, pressing it to my mouth.

"Here, take just a spoonful, it'll make you strong."

"No thank you, Mummy, I'm already strong."

"For me, do it for me," she begged.

"I'm sorry, Mummy, I just can't, it's not kosher."

She threw the Bovril in my face and screamed, "You're a stupid idiot, all this religious mumbo jumbo will only get you a lousy job, a lousy husband and a big belly."

"Good," I answered. "I want lots of children. I don't want my child to be an only child like me."

She flounced out slamming my bedroom door. I wiped my face.

While at home I was still eager to acquire a deeper knowledge of my heritage, which included studying Torah with friends and teachers. As a volunteer I taught Jewish children on Shabbat afternoon, helping to restore the Jewish education which had been lost during the war.

I was also excited about talk of re-establishing the state of Israel. I learned that there were community farming settlements in Israel, *kibbutzim*, worked by Jewish pioneers from all over the world. These young men and women restored the soil, neglected and abused by the Turks, the British, and Arab herders, and restored it back to its biblical promise--"a land flowing with milk and honey."

In Thaxted, East Anglia, there was a model, or simulated kibbutz, a *hachsharah* which meant, "preparation." Here, I joined young people who prepared themselves to live on a *kibbutz*. *Kibbutzniks* and visitors like myself often came for Shabbat or the weekend. Shabbat was beautiful with prayer, rest and learning. On Sundays we worked on the farm during the day, while kitchen and laundry duties were rotated. In the evenings we had debates, quizzes, learned Jewish history and politics, danced Israeli dances, and sang Israeli songs.

I had became an ardent Zionist, so I was interested when Mummy told me she wanted me to join the Anglo-Palestinian Club, a posh Zionist Club in the West End. Socially ambitious for me, Mummy hoped I'd meet a rich man there. I didn't care why she wanted me to join. I was thrilled.

I began going to the club in the evenings, when the lively cafe was bursting with noise and laughter. One night in the club social hall, university students had gathered excitedly around a short, slim man with a great mane of white hair. Speaking in Hebrew, he held fast the Israelis' attention. Shortly, the white-haired man broke out of the circle and came over to me, stared me straight in the eyes with his own, clear bright gaze, stuck out his hand, smiled and said, "Ben Gurion."

"Gilda Moss," I said, shaking his firm hand.

I knew vaguely that he was someone important in Israel, though I was unaware that I had just met the future first prime minister of Israel.

We made light conversation, then the young Israelis put their arms round his shoulders and guided him bodily back into their midst. They were having an excited discussion about whether to continue their university studies in England or return to Israel to join the fight against the British occupation. Under an anti-semitic government, England refused entry into Israel of thousands of Jewish refugees, increasing the number of their deaths at the hands of the Nazis. The British had to go.

I discovered later that Ben Gurion was in England for the World Zionist Conference and to plead with the prime minister to lift the White Paper sanctions that forbade Jews entry into Israel. He asked the British to keep their 1916 promise to recognize an Israeli state. His visit was ultimately successful.

I threw myself into school work and after-school activities, educating Jewish youth groups, going to Shulamit's house, to the *Hachshara*, to Gateshead and to the Anglo-Palestinian Club. I taught Hebrew school on Sundays to earn pocket money. All these activities gave me strength and enjoyment. I saw how good life was in other families and hoped that I would be able to have such a family one day. I knew my present situation was temporary. I just had to stick it out until I was twenty-one. Still, I was only sixteen and five years was a long time to wait. But I was just as determined to practice my religious beliefs as my mother was determined to break me of them.

My father became my passive supporter. Often I thought I saw a gleam of admiration in his eyes. Perhaps he saw me as someone who could stand up to Mummy and perhaps he derived vicarious satisfaction from my defiance. He continued to read voraciously and to visit the museums every Sunday. At first he asked me to go with him as he did when I was a child. But his own cowardice turned me against him. I refused his offers of companionship. For

many years I could not forgive him for his early neglect and for not protecting me from Mummy. So I learned to protect myself and I survived.

Selma, Cookie, and Helga wrote to me from the hostel. They were all coming to London soon and confirmed our meeting at the Trocadero for tea. I looked forward to seeing them. We'd had two wonderful years together. My friends from the hostel had given me the strength to continue my religious beliefs and practices. I hoped we would stay in touch. Their support could help me endure the coming years until at twenty-one, I would be free to leave my home and parents and follow my heart.

30.

Rendezvous

As promised, the four of us, Selma, Helga, Cookie and I, met after the war. The West End was as glamorous as I remembered it, only there were few servicemen on the streets. The Trocadero still had the starched white tablecloths, crystal glasses and roses on each table, that I'd seen through the open doorway on brief visits during the war.

I wore a new blue frilly summer dress bought with my clothes' ration and a frivolous blue hat with bows and a veil I'd made myself. Mummy had begun to let me wear black-market silk stockings, high heels, and makeup. Although I was only sixteen I was sure I looked nineteen. I walked tall, straight, and with confidence. Men stared as they passed me on the street.

Selma wore a slinky green dress that matched her eyes. At fifteen she'd grown taller, her legs were longer, her waist had become more slender, her breasts more ripe.

"Look," she said, holding out her left finger.

I craned to admire the pinprick of a glittering diamond.

"It's gorgeous," I lied. "Franz, from the Cambridge hostel?" I asked."

"The same," she said, laughing her husky laugh.

"Please be seated, ladies," said the waiter. He handed us each a long menu. During the war, with their limited selections, they'd all been short.

As always Cookie wore a crisp white blouse and skirt. Her thick blond hair and bangs, though tossed carelessly, looked perfectly arranged. She still had that haughty aquiline nose and scornful eyes. I couldn't understand how someone as charming as Alex could fall for her.

"What's happening to you?" I asked Cookie.

I hadn't seen her for a month. She and Selma had moved to London and lived in the Cazenove Road hostel for older refugees.

"I'll soon be joining my mother in Santiago," Cookie said. She stretched out the second "a" of Santiago and tossed her head.

"What's she doing in Santiago?" I asked.

Selma and Helga listened as they studied the menus.

"She escaped to Chile at the beginning of the war. She has a business there."

"Is your father well?"

"My father has several factories in Shanghai. I'll visit him after I've seen my mother. They're divorced, you know."

"Is he rich?" Helga asked.

Helga was still the smallest and most timid among us. She had the figure of a child but was mentally sharp.

"Very," Cookie said. "But I don't have any money, yet."

Cookie still looked down her high-bridged nose and spoke sharply, as if she were superior to us. But she'd become calmer since she'd met Alex. In fact her voice was almost soft and quite sweet now, with a faint trace of sadness.

"Are you still seeing Bitch?" I asked.

"Only I'm allowed to call him by that name," she said. "You may call him Alex."

"We all called him Bitch in the hostel," I argued. "But, okay, if you *want* we'll call him Alex. How are you and *Alex* doing?"

"*We* are doing very well, but his mother refuses to meet me. His parents were liberated from Auschwitz, and they now live in London."

"Does she think Alex is too young to be so serious?"

"His mother asked him where I was born. Bitch told her I was born in Berlin and she said, `If she says she's from Berlin, she must be Polish. I refuse to meet a Polish girl. You must marry a German Jewish girl.' She even made Bitch write me a letter swearing never to see me again. What a cow. But Bitch and I speak on the phone all the time. We always will. We'll never, ever be parted," she said, angry tears springing to her eyes.

"Ridiculous," Selma said.

"Poor girl," Helga said.

"That is farcical," I said. After all the deaths caused by Germans, she's still enamored of them?"

"Can you believe that some German Jews still think that they're better than Polish Jews? Bitch is so angry he says he's going to marry a *shiksa* just to spite his parents. I think they must have come out of concentration camp a little crazy. It

would be natural after all that torture, wouldn't it?" she asked.

"Oh, Cookie," I said, "I'm so sorry. But you can marry when you're both twenty-one without any parental permission."

"Six years is a long time to wait. Bitch still has to finish high school, then he's going to medical school. He'll have no money. My parents also say I'm too young to be serious about anybody and won't give us money. But they're wrong, they're so wrong," Cookie said. "He's the only one for me, and always will be for the rest of my life."

She was silent a moment. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She gulped them back. "I have to join my mother in South America, but he'll stay in London. We may never meet again."

For once, Cookie the happy prankster was truly miserable.

"But you're very young. Perhaps you'll meet someone else and forget each other," I said.

"Never," Cookie retorted.

"Then perhaps you'll wait for each other."

"Perhaps, each on the other side of the world," Cookie said. Cookie seized the menu and began reading it intensely.

"What are your plans, Helga?" I asked.

"I'm going to join my parents in Amsterdam. They were born in Germany but say they refuse to set foot in that disgusting country again. My father is half paralyzed and my mother's heart is bad. I'll have to find a job as a social worker, take a degree in social work at night, and devote the rest of my life to

caring for them.

"How long has it been since you saw them?" Selma said.

"Ten years. They sent me to England when I was four. We don't even speak the same language," she said. "They speak only German and I speak only English. We'll be like strangers."

"You're doing a real *mitzvah*, a good deed," I said, "by honoring your father and mother."

"I so much wanted to study art and be a sculptress. Instead I'll have to work to support us all. I'll never have time to practice my art."

"Poor Helga," I said. "At least your parents are alive."

"Yes, and they suffered hell while I was safe in England."

"Would it have been any better if you'd suffered, too?" Cookie said. "Don't be an idiot."

"I feel guilty that they suffered and I didn't," Helga said.

"We all feel guilty for suffering less than our fellow Jews," I said.

I remembered I felt guilty for Freddy's wounds, too. In war, many suffered pain, and those who didn't, suffered guilt.

The waiter hovered discreetly in the background.

"Good grief, look at these prices," I said.

"Never mind that, what are you going to do, Gilda?" Selma asked. "I bet your parents are glad to have you back."

They weren't, but a refugee would never understand that. Their parents had loved them. They had wrenched their weeping

children from their breasts, and sent them to England for their safety. I had been sent away for different reasons, ones that even I couldn't understand, so how could I expect Selma or the others to?

"I plan to finish high school, go to university and study sociology. As soon as I'm twenty-one, I'll leave home, visit America and see Frank Robinson and Mr. Goldstein. Then I'll go to live in Israel," I said. "And you, Selma?"

"My plans are simple," Selma said. "I'm going to marry Franz, have a home and children. That's all I ever wanted."

"Then you're the luckiest one among us," Cookie said.

Selma's parents had both died in concentration camps.

"Franz has an uncle in America who's in the scrap-metal business. Perhaps we'll all meet there," Selma said.

"You think we're all going to America?" I laughed.

"I hope you'll come to my wedding," Selma said, smiling.

The portly waiter in his white shirt and tails approached.

"Yes, ladies," he said, smiling benignly, "please let me know when you are ready to order." He then bowed with a mocking smile and left. We looked at the menu, horrified at the prices.

"How much do you have on you?" I asked the girls.

We each furtively consulted our purses underneath the white linen tablecloth. Between us we had one pound and fifty pence. Cookie gave her old raucous laugh. I kicked her under the table.

"We said we'd eat in a fancy restaurant after the war and

eat we will," I said, beckoning the waiter.

"Madame is ready to order?" he asked me.

"We'll have four rolls with butter and four glasses of water," I said.

"Certainly, Madame," said the waiter, bowing, and smiling indulgently. He returned shortly, carrying high on a silver tray as if it were pheasant, four naked rolls. Each lay on a white plate encircled with gold. His other hand clutched the handles of four heavy glasses of water, which I realized years later, were beer mugs. The waiter was enjoying his private joke.

We all clinked glasses in mid-air.

"Let's meet again in twenty years," I said.

And we did.

Epilogue

Selma finished high school, married Franz and came to America. I realized my dream and left England at the age of twenty-one, the day after my final university exams. I arrived in America for post-graduate study at Columbia in 1950. I visited Selma in her modest apartment in the Bronx. We lost touch for twenty years until I became interested in writing this memoir.

I located her through Nurse. Nurse had also come to America. We met accidentally. While studying at Columbia University, I discovered that she lived next door to me. Nurse and I have always kept in contact. She is now widowed and lives comfortably, in her eighties, in the upper West Side of Manhattan.

Selma died of throat cancer in her fifties. She is survived by her sister in Israel. She never once mentioned this sister while at the hostel. Perhaps having an older sister somewhat accounted for her usual air of calm. She is survived by her husband with whom I spoke recently. Her married name was so unusual I looked it up in the New York directory, and found a cousin who told me how to reach her husband and two adult children. One of her daughters, an actuary and Orthodox, like Selma, met with me recently. She very much wanted to know what I knew about Selma during her mother's time in the hostel as a young girl. We exchanged photographs and are in touch by email and telephone.

Cookie joined her mother in Santiago. I lost touch with her for many years. When I began writing this memoir I found her by calling everyone in Santiago with her maiden family name. I was convinced she'd have married and divorced and returned to her maiden name. I was wrong. Eventually I learned her married name and that she'd moved to Berlin. I found her in the Berlin telephone directory. She had married a German Jewish camp survivor who became a leader of the Jewish community of Berlin.

Alex or Bitch carried out his threat to marry a gentile, although she converted to Judaism. He became a doctor, and is now retired, and has written a medical thriller. I found him two hours away in Philadelphia simply by looking him up in an AMA directory. I put him in touch with Cookie after they'd lost touch with each other for many years. Almost every year Cookie and her husband came to America to see friends and relatives. Cookie and Alex always took a few days off to tour America together. Neither of their spouses seem to object. I always meet with Cookie and Alex, and sometimes Helga comes over from Holland when they visit.

Helga became a social worker, and cared for her parents throughout their lives, in Holland. She has a pretty little house and beautiful garden in Amsterdam where I was a lucky to be a guest in 1997. She never married but is as pretty as ever, has found love late in life, and is an accomplished sculptress.

Among the other boys, Alex's brother died young, of stomach

cancer. Herman was killed in a car accident. Joey and Gustave live in Israel. Joey is a notable biochemist and Gustave, now retired, was a businessman. I found them all through Nurse, Cookie or the Wreschners. I also found others through Rabbi Kohler's daughter, Lily, who lives in Jerusalem. The Wreschners, our last wardens were immensely hospitable and helpful in locating members of the hostel and in filling in information where necessary. I organized two reunions of the hostel kids who live in Israel, Joey, Gustave, Lily Kohler, and all their respective spouses. Chaim Kahn, an Israeli whom I met at the London School of Economics, and knew most of my hostel friends, joined us with his beautiful wife, Lisa.

Norma Huberman and her handsome brother Hans are mentioned briefly in the book. They both emigrated to Israel, both are married and have several children. I met them a few years ago. Hans is as handsome as ever.

Most of the hostel girls and boys have remained orthodox.

There were three sets of wardens, the Shapiros, the Kohlers and the Wreschners. Mr. Shapiro headed a top-notch Jewish Day school after the war, then emigrated to Australia and continued in his role as educator. Rabbi and Mrs. Kohler retired and died some time ago. Rabbi Kohler's older daughter Ruth married a yeshivah scholar whom she supported while he learned Torah all day, and settled in New York. Ruth died in the 1980s. Her younger sister, Lily, emigrated to Israel, married and still

lives there with her children. She works with Alzheimer patients. Her accountant husband died only recently. I meet with Lily most times when I visit Israel, which is almost every year.

Still alive and lively in their eighties, the Wreschners live in Israel. Mr. Wreschner continued his creative education program for many years, while Mrs. Wreschner was a nurse until her retirement. They have four children, all Israeli born as intended, and many grandchildren.

Margo Wreschner has been a source of information and helped me locate several hostel girls. The only girl I have been unable to trace is Marta Yellinek. I heard only that she married well, is widowed and lives in Canada. Miss Wolf emigrated to Israel and married.

I have not tried to trace Paula Korn, the girl who sang with me, though I remember her face vividly. No one knows what happened to her. The same is true for Anita and for Mrs. Rozenfeld. Hers is such a common name I could not hope to trace her. I remember her face and how kind she was.

I and several other former hostel residents have visited the White House in Great Chesterford. Great Chesterford is still a small country village but has become almost a suburb for some London workers.

The White House has been declared a historic monument as it is now nearly five hundred years old. It has since been divided into two homes. Both occupants, the Hayes, and the other couple

whose name escapes me, received me extremely cordially and offered me tea, when I visited about ten years ago. They were most gracious. They told me that several other hostel children had visited. Gustave and Alex told me that they also visited the house and had been graciously received. We hostel children seem to be a curious but pleasant oddity to the present residents.

The inside of the hostel had not much changed except for the addition of carpeting and extra modern bathrooms and modernization of the kitchen. The veranda outside the library is just the same. Part of the enormous garden has been sold.

The Great Chesterford station was as empty as it used to be, although the train going up from London had the usual gaggle of high school brats like ourselves, giggling in the carriages. However the train I rode on did not have the glamorous, to me, corridor with separate carriages. Each carriage now looks like a long bus with open seating, as in America and far less intriguing.

There were no Yanks on the trains. The old American air bases are gone, although one of them, Stansted, is still an airport now serving the British.

I traced the girls with whom I went to school in Ely, or in Spitalfied, by putting an ad in the London Jewish Chronicle. Most of them answered me and informed of the whereabouts of those who did not. We had a marvelous reunion in 1998. I remain friends with Norma Gelkoff and Phyllis Pshygody. Phyllis, newly widowed,

and her daughter, visited America and stayed with me last year.

I have not, to my regret, traced Jocelyn Thielkul, nor Peggy Hewing both of whom I would love to meet again. I found a cousin of Yvonne de Bled simply by calling anyone by that name in the London telephone directory, but the cousin does not know Yvonne's present whereabouts.

I saw Joseph Singer once again in Ely. He had married very young and had a baby. We passed in the street and looked at each other without speaking. To this day I do not know if he ever received my letter.

I stayed in touch with my one nice foster parents, the Pettits of Newmarket, and visited them in 1945, while still at the hostel. Their son, Ron, and I are still in touch.

I returned to visit Herts and Essex High school and was very nicely received by Miss Taylor, one of the teachers.

I have never tried to find the Schenkers but would like to. It is highly unlikely they are still alive but there may be relatives or children who remember them as fondly as I do.

The Anglo-Palestinian Club where I met Ben Gurion seems to have disappeared. Although I wrote to an address for information, no one could tell me what happened to it.

As for myself, after my three years at the London School of Economics and Political Science, I withdrew all the savings my mother had amassed for me, for my fare to America. I have my mother to thank for having banked all of the money awarded me in

scholarship for school fees and stipend. She also saved all the small money gifts which it was the custom for relatives and friends to give to children.

When I was twenty-one I withdrew all this money. I bought a one way ticket to America and arrived with $60 in my pocket. I had been accepted for post-graduate study in sociology at Columbia University. I intended to visit Frank Robinson, the editor Goldstein, and Booba's sister, and then to settle in Israel.

Arriving in 1950 I had a difficult time economically, working in a mannequin factory among other exotic places, to put myself through Columbia and N.Y.U. During the McCarthy period I found the expression of political opinion highly restrictive and totally different from my experience in England. I earned a Master's degree at Columbia and my PhD at N.Y.U. and taught at Brooklyn College. I married and had three children, moved with my husband to Washington, and later divorced. Two of my children live in America, one in Israel. I am widely travelled, and have taught, carried out research, and published in social psychology for twenty-five years. My special interest is animal and human spatial behavior in groups, that is, spatial position in relation to the rest of the group and what it signifies. Other research compares distance from others required by schizophrenics and normals as a possible diagnostic tool. I am interested in the body language of suicide bombers in a crowd of intended victims.

I have carried out and published research findings on human response to buildings in normal situations and during fire. I have written for the Jewish presses and a history of Sumptuary Law. I also own a small business and write constantly.

I have kept a journal since the age of fifteen, until the present day. Several of these have evolved into memoirs and short stories. "Always a Stranger" is the first of my memoirs.

There is a prequel to this memoir which relates growing up in pre-war England during the reign of King George V, and with my East End Jewish family which, before the war, was still intact. East London before the war was the home of working class cockney gentiles, Jews and immigrants and a fascinating area to grow up in. Cockney humor and fortitude thankfully runs through my veins.

Evacuation, hard as it was, separated me from my mother for six years, but perhaps saved my sanity. I always compare myself to girls and women survivors of the Holocaust. But for twenty miles of English Channel, and my tough grandmother's decision to leave Poland around 1910, I could have been one of them. Instead, I was born an Englishwoman and a secular Jew, and am now an Anglo-American orthodox woman, a social psychologist and businesswoman, with strong ties to Israel.

Just as the refugee children always thought I was lucky to have a family and did not know the kind of family I had, I always read in Holocaust accounts of the close-knit, warm families from which these children were torn. Perhaps their good early family

life (unless they idealized it) helped the children survive the terrible times which followed. I, on the other hand, had a full family but one which depleted me of emotional security.

I do not know whether my mother was emotionally disturbed in her early life or whether she was just an unwilling mother. She had many positive attributes when younger. She was very witty, clever, had a beautiful voice, and played the piano well. She fought for me to have the education she was denied and provided the means for me to do so.

However, she sent me away repeatedly from a very young age, my uncle says, from the age of three, even before the orphanage. Uncle Max said she was always eccentric, but did not further explain. There was a bitter rift between my mother and her sister Regina and between my mother and her mother, which poisoned my relationship with the entire family. I basically had no family at all from 1940 until I had been in America for twelve years.

In 1962 I visited home for the first time since 1950 with two of my small children. My mother was no kinder then. My grandparents, aunts and uncles agreed to see me, but not my mother. Zada loved the children. When my children were in their teens and we visited London, my glamorous aunt Regina took us all out to restaurants and the ballet.

After my mother's death in 1975, Daddy finally became the father I'd always wanted. He spoke to me, wrote to me and helped me financially in the hard times following my divorce. He told me

many stories about the family, all of which I have recorded. He turned out to have a great sense of humor, a cockney grittiness to survive despite almost total hearing loss and a solitary life. He lived for my visits from America.

I have maintained contact with Uncle Max's daughter and with Aunt Regina's daughter, both barristers. My other cousin, Penina, lives in Israel not far from my younger daughter.

I met the editor with whom I had the disastrous tea, later, in New York. He is now a well-known art historian. He does not remember me but received me hospitably and confirmed my memories of his London home. I did meet his mother on coming to America. She was still charming and kind.

I lived in two worlds, that of the British-born Jew and that of the refugee. In both groups I was a stranger. Even today I stand alone outside each, always looking in, seeing and recording, I hope, with a fresh eye.

I thank each member of the hostel, children and wardens and nurse, who gave me information. I thank the kind and bemused occupants of the White House in Great Chesterford for their kind reception when I and other hostel children visited this happy place. The girls of Spitalfields have provided much joy in our reunion and continued friendship into our mature years.

I continue to be a practicing Jew and Zionist and am closely involved in my Jewish community and with Israel.

This book was written and read to various writer groups at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, and to many individual groups and friends. They gave their time and expertise and encouragement unstintingly. Of the many kind writers and readers I can thank only a few: Mara Aranovitch, Dr. Eva Harnich, Madame Hemmendinger, Rhoda Orlow, Richard Peabody, David Roach, Molly Tinsley. Three writers' groups gave infinite patience and comments: The Mentors Group, led by Carol Hoover, The Connecticut Avenue Writers' Group led by Yoma Ullman and a writer's group headed by Toby Hecht. Yoma Ullman deserves especial thanks for years of unflagging support.

Last but not least I thank Stephen Ryan for his patient and insightful editing of this book.

All errors of judgement are my own.

This story is one told by an English Jewish girl who began World War II as a child of nine. I was evacuated to many foster homes, experienced the turmoil of war in one of the few countries not occupied by the Germans, and ended as a teenager in a refugee hostel, though not a refugee. Many holocaust stories have been written but this story has not been told by anyone. It is a unique story and is based, from the age of fifteen, on diaries.

Many photographs of people and scenes described are available.

Names and spellings

In almost all cases real names of people in the book have been given. Names have been changed only when the person written about might feel that more of their personal life has been revealed than they wish. Alex said I could use his name but I felt freer to write about him using a pseudonym. The same is true for Cookie. I believe all other names are true names.

Regarding spelling there was a dilemma as to whether to use English or American spelling. We settled for American i.e. labor instead of labour.

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